

Bloggng on the Eve of Dan Rather's Retirement

John Hinderaker and Scott W. Johnson

March 9, 2005

Introduction by Mitch Pearlstein

In the very good, even adulatory, [Time magazine story](#) about [Power Line](#) last December, reporter Leb Grossman wrote that, "Before 2004, blogs were a curiosity, a cult phenomenon, a faintly embarrassing hobby on the order of ham radio and stamp collecting. But in 2004, blogs unexpectedly vaulted into the pantheon of major media, alongside TV, radio, and, yes, magazines, and it was Power Line, more than any other blog, that got them there." And of Scott and John themselves, along with the third member of the Power Line trio, Paul Mirengoff, who works out of Washington, Grossman said, "They're a fun bunch, in a lawyerly way." These two excerpts thematically mirror tonight's program. Blogging has become serious and consequential business, as witness its vitally important role—its several vitally important roles— during last year's presidential race.

Yet for all that sobriety, this is still a retirement party. For a veteran journalist—never mind what hard feelings may have existed over the decades on either side of the remote—who has taught us hundreds, maybe even thousands, of pithy life lessons like these:

- If a frog had side pockets, he'd carry a gun.
- Don't taunt the alligator until after you've crossed the creek.
- Or that the 2000 presidential race was tight like a too-small bathing suit on a too-long ride home from the beach.
- Even more famously, from 2000, that the presidential race was a tight as the rusted lug nuts on a '55 Ford.
- Or, finally, in an act of impressive humility, a man who acknowledged on the air a few years ago that when the going gets weird, anchormen punt.

While the intended spirit tonight is indeed waggish, the issue at heart is weighty. At risk of being a party poop, tonight's subject is ultimately nothing to be laughed at, as up for reflection is nothing short of an emerging and fundamentally new way of debating and pursuing public life and politics in the United States. In their remarks tonight, Messrs. Johnson and Hinderaker will talk about the role they played in exposing [the fraudulent 60 Minutes II report](#) last September on President Bush's Air National Guard service, as well as consider more broadly what their experience illustrates about the power of the Internet as a medium of information and, as they write, "the boiling of the dinosaurs of big media."

John Hinderaker and Scott Johnson have much in common. Actually, it's scary how much they have in common. Each either was born on the prairie or grew up there, John in Watertown, South Dakota, and Scott in Fargo, North Dakota. Each started out on the political left but moved right as they moved east to attend Dartmouth as undergraduates. From there, they both went on to law school, but while Scott returned to the Midwest to attend the University of Minnesota, John stayed east to attend Harvard. After law school, both wound up in the Twin Cities, practicing at the distinguished firm of Faegre & Benson, where John remains. Scott has since become an attorney and officer of TCF National Bank. Both have served on American Experiment's board of directors, Scott currently and John until a few years ago. John, in fact, was chairman of the center from 2000 to 2002. Both have written superbly for *American Experiment Quarterly* and other center publications and both currently serve as fellows of the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship. In 2002, Scott and John, along with the Washington attorney, Paul Mirengoff, founded Power Line, as previously noted, *Time* magazine's Blog of the Year last year.

A Blog is Born

Scott Johnson: About ten years ago, shortly after John and I started writing columns and articles together for the *Pioneer Press* and the *Star Tribune* and our favorite magazines like *National Review*, I cold-called Mitch and told him that we had a piece we wanted him to take a look at. He didn't know us from Adam, but he gladly met us for breakfast. And we told him that we were having a hard time placing the piece, and Mitch read it, liked it, thought it was good, and published it very shortly after we gave it to him, and really launched us on our way. Mitch, we're grateful for your support and for the center's support. John, take it away.

John Hinderaker: I thought it might be helpful to just very briefly recap our experience before the "Sixty-first Minute." which was the Dan Rather story.

I had been getting most of my news off the Internet for a while and I had been reading a few blogs. Then over Memorial Day weekend of 2002, I thought the Internet would be maybe a good medium for Scott and me to work in, because you don't have to go through newspaper editors and when we had a few minutes we could just bang out a post. It seemed to offer a lot of spontaneity. So, I went to Blogger and in about five minutes, I had a website set up. Blogger is website where you can get free software and free hosting so you can set up a blog. That's the easiest way to do it. We're off Blogger now, but that's where we started.

But not being a very creative guy, the one thing I couldn't think of was a name for this site. I was sitting there stumped and my oldest daughter, Laura, who was thirteen at the time, was sitting nearby with her friend. She asked what I was doing. And I told them and I said I couldn't think of a name, and they said, what's the website going to be about? And I said we're going to do political commentary. Laura's friend thought for a second and she said, well, why don't you call it Power Line. I said, hey, that's a pretty good idea. I fooled around over the weekend, getting the hang of the software, and then on Monday, I called Scott and I said I'd set up this website and asked him take a look at it and think

about joining me in posting on it and becoming a blogger. And I don't think Scott had ever really heard about this before, but he said he'd look at the website and get back to me the next day, and he did. He called me the next day and said it looked like a lot of fun and that it would be worth doing, even if nobody ever reads the stuff except us. But, he said, the idea that we could ever have any readers for this thing is a pathetic fantasy. So, with that optimistic spirit, the website was born. And for several months, we started posting and we did what we could to promote the site.

Blogs are terrific, they're easy, they're cheap—if not free—and the only downside is how to get anybody to read them. So, we worked at building up our readership and what really put us on the map was the off-year elections in November of 2002 because, as you remember, Minnesota was the eye of the hurricane at that time, with the Coleman-Wellstone race, the plane crash, the funeral. And a number of national news people figured out that we had a pretty good line into what was happening in Minnesota, Hugh Hewitt for one. And that's really what got our traffic off the ground. After November 2002 we continued getting readers as we went along, up until September of 2004, when this happened. The reason that I think it's worth recounting is that we were in the right place on the right time on Sept. 9 of 2004. We were only able to do what we did because we had readers. One of the main things we'll be talking about tonight is that the information that was important on that day didn't come from us, it came from the readers of our site. So, it was only because we'd worked away for two and a half years at building an audience that we were in a position that what happened on Sept. 9 could happen. So, Scott, why don't you take it from there.

SJ: Fast-forward to late 2003, early 2004, and I want to try to frame Rathergate in two sets of stories that, in my view, provide the context. On the one hand, there was a parade of what was a succession of bogus Bush administration scandals, largely retailed in the mainstream media, beginning with Joseph Wilson's *New York Times* op-ed piece in mid-2003, if I remember correctly, regarding Niger. And then that turned into the scandal of the alleged outing of Valerie Plame that the *New York Times* demanded a special prosecutor for and that has resulted in the subpoena of a *New York Times* reporter as a witness on that, which the *New York Times* has resisted. And lately discovered, late-breaking news as of about last week, that, according to the *New York Times*, a crime may not have been committed in connection with that. So, as I say, the Joseph Wilson/Valerie Plame is kind of the granddaddy of the succession of bogus scandals that was followed by Paul O'Neill and Ron Suskind, Richard Clark Rathergate fits in there chronologically, and that concluded in the last week of the campaign with—this is perfect—the joint CBS/*New York Times* front page story on Al-Caca, a late-breaking bogus scandal that really culminated that succession. That's on the one hand.

We wrote about each of those bogus at great length on Power Line and talked about why we thought they were phony. So, if you have any interest in them, take a look at our site and use the search engine on those names.

On the other hand, there was a story that the mainstream media tried to ignore, tried to bury, a story we followed: the emergence of the Swift Boat Vets. You may remember it was very tough for them to get covered in the broadcast news or in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, when they emerged in March 2004. These veterans, who had

served in the same area as John Kerry in Vietnam, were returning a second time to serve their country. They reemerged in August with the publication of John O'Neill's huge bestseller *Unfit for Command*. At that point, the mainstream media could not keep the story suppressed and tried to trash the Swift Boat Vets and John O'Neill in a variety of ways. But at that point in the campaign, August 2004, the Swift Boat Vets had, in fact, had a huge impact. And President Bush regained a slight lead in the polls that he never did give up at that point. And, in my view, those two sets of stories are the frame of Rathergate. By September, the Kerry campaign was poised to counterattack the Swift Boat Vets, *Unfit for Command*, attack President Bush and his narrow lead, hand-in-hand with the mainstream media. The Kerry campaign had prepared an advertising campaign called Operation Fortunate Son that harked back to an old Credence Clearwater song about a guy who'd been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and didn't have to serve in Vietnam. The theme of the campaign was to trash President Bush's Air National Guard service. That was scheduled to unroll in early September 2004. It was timed to coincide with the Sept. 8 *60 Minutes II* report attacking President Bush's Air National Guard service.

On the morning of Sept. 8, I read the *Boston Globe* story that covered a few new documents that the Pentagon had just released relating to President Bush's Air National Guard service that they made sound like a scandal. I read those documents. They testified to the meritorious nature, the admirable nature of President Bush's Air National Guard service, and his skills as a pilot. And then on the next morning—Sept. 9—I went again to the *Boston Globe* and read about the CBS *60 Minutes* broadcast that had aired the night before. I went back to the online version of the story that CBS had posted on its website and saw the CBS *60 Minutes* story. The theme was four new documents that suggested that President Bush's Air National Guard service had been dishonorable in various ways. The *60 Minutes* online version of the story posted those four documents as .pdf documents, which I opened up and read. And because I was familiar with the basic facts regarding President Bush's National Guard service, there were various things in those documents that struck me as funny. I looked at one of them long and hard and thought, boy, if this is true, it's really bad, a memo that was authored by President Bush's commanding officer. And I wrote a couple of paragraphs noting that the documents were there, noting that the *Boston Globe* story, noting the CBS *60 Minutes* story, looked at our email, and we had a reader email that had come in overnight with a couple of paragraphs that had been taken from a post #47 on the Free Republic site on the CBS *60 Minutes* story. Those couple of paragraphs raised a question concerning the authenticity of those four documents. So I posted all that at 7:50 on the morning on Sept. 9, thinking that there might be more to the story than what CBS had broadcast the night before. I titled the post "The Sixty-First Minute." I left for work but ended up not working at all that day.

The Drudge Factor

I ended up taking the whole day off because by the time I got to work at 8:30 there were about fifty emails in our inbox with information of all kinds from readers, suggesting that the documents were fraudulent. And I did update the post that morning, with select bits from the best of those emails. I continued to read them during the morning until about 10:30 when I got an email from my favorite blogger, Charles Johnson, who runs a site

called Little Green Footballs. Charles' expertise is in computer desktop publishing. He's a very smart, very funny guy. He emailed me, saying he had recreated one of the documents. He had opened Microsoft Word, set it 12-point type, Times New Roman with default settings, and recreated the document identically and had posted it on his site. I included that in an update on our site, declaring the documents forged. That was at 10:30 on the morning of Sept. 9. And by noon, we were inundated with emails. I have never done this before, I called up John and told him I needed him to jump in and help me edit the material that's available to us here. I'd never had to do that before. I made my second call to John after I took a look at the Drudge Report. There's a screaming headline, a flashing police emergency light, with the inverted 60 Minutes stopwatch, and noticed that we couldn't get to our site anymore. John, what happened next?

JH: Once the Drudge Report linked to us, there were a couple of hours when you just couldn't access Power Line at all because the traffic was so heavy, and it just kind of kept taking off from there, as more and more sites linked to us, more and more emails came in. Scott and I eventually both wound up taking the rest of the day off, going home to just manage the situation, read emails, update the 61st Minute.

Peer Review

I want to talk a little bit, though, about the nature of the information that we got from our readers. It was basically in three categories. The first related to issues of typography, and this is the one that's most familiar to everybody and if you've only read about this story in the mainstream media, it's probably the only one that you've heard about.

But a lot of readers were pointing out that, visually, it seemed reasonably clear that these documents had been produced on a computer, using a word processing program like, say, Microsoft Word, as opposed to having been produced on a typewriter back in the early 1970s. You'd be amazed at how many people there are out there in the world who know all about typewriters of the early 1970s—typewriter salesmen, typewriter repairmen, typewriter collectors. I think we heard from every single one of them and the judgment was unanimous. We did a series of about fifteen updates over the course of the day and then we cut that post off and did a series of new posts as additional information came in. But update #10 is an example of one that talks about these typographical issues. For example, a reader wrote in talking about something called kerning, which relates to the fact that in a word processing software program, the software knows what letter comes before and after each letter so it doesn't have to give each letter the same amount of space. The tail on the "Y" could curl under the letter that comes before the "Y." You can't do that on a typewriter because, the typewriter doesn't know what's coming next. Each key, each letter, each symbol must occupy unique space. These documents showed evidence of kerning, which was one very strong indication that they had been produced by a word processor very recently, not by a typewriter in the early 1970s.

Around lunchtime we put up side by side a copy of a genuine Texas Air National Guard memorandum from 1972 with one of the forged documents, just to show how obvious it was that these faked documents were not, in fact, from that era.

SJ: We'd never heard the word "kerning" before the morning of Sept. 9, but at noon, John told me the key to the case was kerning.

JH: That was not the first time that Scott thought I'd flip my lid, but it was on the list.

You don't have to be an expert to know that that doesn't look anything like a typed document from the early 1970s. That looks like a memo that you might send in your office today. After I put those two documents up side by side, I was so convinced that what our readers were telling us was true that I added, "*60 Minutes* is toast." It turned out to be correct.

But that was only one category of information we got from our readers. The second category of information had to do with issues of military practice and protocol. It turns out that if you served in military units in the early 1970s—which we didn't, but many of our readers did—you vividly remember how to abbreviate certain things, for example. What exactly were the letters? Are there periods between those letters when you abbreviate them? And when you're writing a memo as opposed to a letter, does the signature block go on the left side or the right side?

I don't know the answers to any of those questions, but a lot of our readers did know those kinds of obscure points of military protocol, and they pointed out that whoever faked these documents knew something about military protocol, but not enough, because there were many, many errors in the way that these documents were put together.

The third category of information is what I've always thought is the most important, and this is the one that's hardest to ever hear about if you're relying on the mainstream media for your information. It has to do with the content of the documents. After the whole story blew up and it was generally recognized that these documents were fraudulent, the *New York Times*, in a headline, referred to them as "fake but accurate." And this is a concept that a lot of people tried to sell, and it's very important to understand that these documents and the story, in their content, were inaccurate.

About 10:30 in the morning on Sept. 9, we got an email from a reader who sent us a link to a story that had appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* about a year earlier. It was very important because the key one of these *60 Minutes* documents, in my view, was one that was ostensibly dated Aug. 18 of 1973. It was a memo to the file, ostensibly by Lt. Col. Jerry Killian, who said that "Stout" was pressuring him, or pressuring Bobby Hodges, to improve Lt. Bush's evaluation. Stout would be Brig. Gen. Buck Stout, who was, in fact, in command of that group. And this is August, supposedly, of 1973. Well, about 10:30 in the morning, we got an email from a reader with a link to a *Los Angeles Times* article that just happened to mention that Brig. Gen. Buck Stout had retired from the Texas Air National Guard in March of 1972—a year and a half before the fake memo was dated.

It's very important to recognize that there was information in all three of these categories. If there's one point that we want to make sure everybody takes away from this talk tonight, it's the following: the three topics that we got the information on from our readers were all subjects that we knew little or nothing about.

The information didn't come from us, it came from our readers. This illustrates what makes the Internet such a powerful medium. I think that's the real moral of the story. It's not about us; it's about the media. It's always been true that scattered all around the country and all around the world are hundreds or even thousands of people, each of whom has a little piece of information that's relevant to a news story or a public issue. But until the Internet came along, there was no way to collect all those little pieces of information, analyze them, sift them, put them together into the bigger picture. Now, there is, and that's exactly what happened here. Hundreds of citizens, scattered around the country, each of whom had a fact, a little piece of information, sent it in to us. Our role was to sift through it, analyze it, edit it, choose what we thought was most important, most reliable. In situations where readers would disagree—and that happened—we'd put up both sides of the story.

By the end of that first day, the number of people who knew about this controversy was in the millions. The information all came from our readers, which is what I would call the vertical interactivity of the Internet—communication between our website and its readers.

The second thing that makes the Internet such a powerful medium I would call horizontal interactivity, and that is the interactivity among the various websites and among bloggers. But, not limited to that. We always emphasize when we tell this story that we were not the only ones. We were one of many blogs, many websites that contributed. Little Green Footballs played a role. A guy named Bill Indolino from a site called INDC played a significant part, and we added their information to what we were getting from our readers. Over the course of the day, approximately 500 other websites linked to Power Line and so their readers became aware of the controversy and their readers started sending us information or starting sending them information.

It all kept going into the pot and by the end of the day, the information that we were able to collect was just tremendous in scope. By 7:30 on the evening of Sept. 9—less than twelve hours after Scott did that original The Sixty-First Minute post before he left for work, it was reported that executives at CBS News were meeting to discuss whether they needed to launch an investigation. Less than twelve hours after Scott did his original post. That shows is the power of the medium, the Internet.

SJ: We have a little bit more information today on a number of the subjects related to this story than we did on Sept. 9. The story broke into the mainstream media on Sept. 10, and the mainstream media pursued the story with some of the sources of information that we had identified, like a forensic document expert that Bill Indolino at INDC had taken to lunch on the day of Sept. 9. But one of the interesting aspects of the story is that CBS stonewalled for the following twelve days, and I kept asking myself during those days, isn't there some adult corporate supervision at the company? It was obvious that the story had perpetrated a fraud and, yet, they were standing behind it. And in those twelve days, Dan Rather came on in one of those newscasts and assured us that the documents were bona fide because they had come from an unimpeachable source. And I just kept asking myself: what's going on?

Bad Days at Black Rock

Thanks to the Rathergate report prepared by former attorney general Richard Thornburgh and former AP head Louis Boccardi, you can see what happened inside the CBS news operation during those twelve days. The report has limitations, but within the scope of what it does, it's unbelievably informative.

The Rathergate report recounts the cover-up phase of the scandal over about sixty pages and it makes clear that every person involved in the story—up to the president of CBS News, Andrew Hayward—had been informed, directly or indirectly, by document experts that the documents were phony. And the cover-up nevertheless proceeded for another ten days, during which Dan Rather assured us publicly that there was no basis to challenge the documents because they come from an unimpeachable source, but the report takes us behind the scenes and shows Rather making phone calls to his friends at other news organizations, newspapers, and broadcast networks, assuring them of the veracity of the story. It's really a shocking account and it belies a lot of the stuff you've heard about it since then. That's the cover-up phase of the report. John, what do you say about the rest of the fake but accurate story?

JH: The Thornburgh report is a fascinating document. It falls short in some respects, but it does a terrific job of pulling together in one place a lot of the evidence relating to these documents and to what happened in that *60 Minutes* report. And it's very important, because a lot of people misunderstand what that report says. Dan Rather was on the David Letterman show just a few nights ago and he was trying to push the idea that these documents may be genuine, after all. And he said that the Thornburgh report didn't conclude that the documents were fakes. David Letterman said, really, they didn't, so the documents may be genuine?

It's true that the Thornburgh report simply abstains from making an ultimate judgment about the documents. The report does say, "The panel finds many reasons to question the documents' authenticity." And it goes on, page after page after page, to lay out all of the conclusive arguments that show that the documents were fake. No one could read that report without concluding that, indeed, they were fraudulent. They recapped the evidence on typography that I talked about and they attach as an appendix summary of a report from a document examiner named Peter Tytell in New York, which concludes, "The Killian documents were not produced on a typewriter in the early 1970s and therefore were not authentic." It also talks about the issues of military protocol and they do a wonderful job. They go through and they itemize, for example, six different abbreviations that whoever faked these documents got wrong as compared to actual military practice of the time. But where the Thornburgh report, I think, did the best job was in pulling together and documenting all of the problems with the content of the documents. And, again, I keep coming back to that. The content of the documents was wrong, was inaccurate. They talked about the fact that Gen. Stout had retired a year and a half before he was supposedly pressuring Bobby Hodges. They talk about the other key memo, which was dated May 4, 1972. That's the one where Jerry Killian purports in the memo to order Lieutenant Bush to take a physical no later than May 14, 1972. And the Thornburgh report points out that this makes no sense whatsoever, because the rule was that a pilot had a ninety-day window within which to take a physical each year. The ninety days ended on the last day of the month in which he had his birthday. President

Bush's birthday is in July, so his ninety days ended at the end of July and the first day he could have taken a physical for that year was May 2.

So, it makes no sense whatsoever for Jerry Killian to be angry that he hasn't taken a physical on May 4 and order him to take one by May 14. As they point out, that is completely inconsistent with the relevant military practice. So, not only were the documents fakes, but the message of the documents was a false message. And I guess, as far as I'm concerned, at least, the way I'd like to wrap up before we go to your questions is by talking for just a moment about the broader issue that was raised in this *60 Minutes* report. Because the theme of the report was that President Bush's National Guard service was somehow discreditable or dishonorable. It precisely duplicated the theme of the Democratic National Committee's advertising campaign that started the following morning. I think it's very important to understand how false those claims really were. The Thornburgh really talks about this, although it doesn't intend to. Because the Thornburgh report—this is a bombshell that nobody knows about—notes that when Mary Mapes, the producer of this story, was doing her investigation, her file reflects that she learned that no influence was used to help George W. Bush get into the Texas Air National Guard. She learned that that wasn't true. She learned, in doing her investigation, that there was no waiting list to become a pilot in the Texas Air National Guard, that canard is constantly repeated, was repeated in the DNC campaign. She learned that it wasn't true. The theme of this whole story was that President Bush had joined the Texas Air National Guard in order to get out of going to Vietnam, and yet the Thornburgh report says that Mary Mapes learned when she was doing her research that George W. Bush had volunteered to go to Vietnam but had been turned down because he didn't have quite enough pilot hours to qualify. So the story wasn't just wrong in its details and it wasn't just wrong in its documents. The whole point—the essence of the story—was false. One of the things that we did on Power Line was print Lt. Bush's evaluations for the years 1971 and 1972.

In 1971, Jerry Killian, the same guy who was supposedly authoring these memos now, twenty years after his death, this is what he really had to say about Lt. Bush. "Lt. Bush is an exceptionally fine young officer and pilot. He came to this unit as a highly qualified fighter interceptor pilot. Lt. Bush possesses sound judgment and is mature beyond his age and experience level. He performed in an outstanding manner. Lt. Bush has outstanding growth potential and should be promoted well ahead of his contemporaries." That's what Jerry Killian really thought about Lt. Bush. And here's what Lt. Bush's evaluation said in 1972, the first year when, according to these fake memos, he was being derided and criticized by his commanding officers. Here's what the evaluation actually said. "Lt. Bush is an exceptional fighter interceptor pilot and officer. He eagerly participates in scheduled unit activities."

In the aftermath of our exposure and other bloggers' exposure of the fake documents, there's been this revisionist history, this effort to go back and say, well, they were fake but accurate, or the documents may have been fishy, but the story really was true. And it's too bad, a lot of people have said that it's too bad that the focus was on the documents, because people should have continued criticizing President Bush's National

Guard service. And I guess my parting thought would be that it's not just the documents that were fakes, the whole story was a fake.

SJ: If you consider the substance of the report, CBS owes President Bush an apology for trashing his record of service. And it's a disgrace that they have not extended it. I was on Minnesota Public Radio yesterday with a very smart, responsible woman, Jane Kirtley, who's the head of the Otto Silha Center at the University of Minnesota, who concurred with the statement by the host of the show that it's really a shame that Dan Rather had to resign when, in fact, these documents might be authentic. The report did not conclude that they were fraudulent. And she seemed to suggest that she bought this line that CBS is purveying. They have done something terribly wrong. They owe an apology. That's the end of the story, from our perspective.

Questions & Answers

MITCH PEARLSTEIN: My first question is a personal one: how in the world do you guys find the time to do this?

JH: Well, Scott, for one thing, gets up at five every morning and does it before work. I don't get up that early, but I do it before work. I'll be, shaving, and I've got a laptop propped up there next to the sink. Whenever we have a few minutes over the course of the day, we'll be on the Internet, checking news sites and looking for things to comment upon. So, it helps if your personality is a bit obsessive, but somehow we find the time.

PATRICK CAMPION: I'm from AM1280-The Patriot. My question would be, as much like you guys did here with CBS, it's been recently suggested by Hugh Hewitt that something similar is done to the *Star Tribune* on a daily basis. What's your thought on his idea for swarming the *Strib*?

SJ: I wrote a little bit about that on our website this morning. I have had a lot of dealings with the news reporters at the *Star Tribune* over the past ten years, both in connection with my practice as an attorney and in more recent years in connection with events related to our site. And I have enormous respect for the news reporters at the *Star Tribune*, first and foremost Kevin Duchschere, but a lot of the other reporters over there, Matt McKinney, who's here tonight. These are really outstanding people who, in my view, bend over backwards to be fair. We've had quarrels with the editorial page and with columnists at the *Star Tribune*. Mitch Berg from Shot in the Dark is here tonight and the Fraters Libertas guys are here tonight, and I think it's fair to say that we have been swarming the *Star Tribune* for the past two and a half years, and they've started attacking us in a kind of vicious personal way in their columns and on the editorial page, and it's extremely unpleasant. We've never done anything but direct our criticism to the substance of what's carried in the columns and editorial pages. But I'm not sure, I concur with Mitch Berg, who has written that there may not be a need for a separate site when you aggregate what we have among those of us who are covering the *Strib* here on our sites. But thanks for the question, it's a great one.

DAVID STROM: David Strom, Taxpayers League of Minnesota. I have a question having to do with some of the consistent themes we've seen through Nick Coleman and

Jim Boyd (deputy editor of the *Star Tribune* editorial page) and all the critics of the blogs, questioning the credentials of people like us to comment on things. And I've always found that kind of a fascinating thing to watch people questioning Dartmouth grads who have gone on to Harvard Law. Could you talk a little bit about that? Because that is one of the ways that they try to undermine the credibility of bloggers. It's like saying, well, we've got J school degrees, you don't.

JH: Well, two quick points on that. When I'm asked that question, my stock answer is to say that when we write for Power Line, we exercise the same standards of care and accuracy that we use when we're writing for the *New York Times*, the *New York Post*, the *Minneapolis StarTribune*, the *Pioneer Press*, the *Orange County Register*, *National Review*, *American Enterprise*, and many, many other newspapers and magazines that we have written for and continue to write for. It's odd that in all the years we've been writing commentary, nobody ever thought to question our credentials until we started doing it on the Internet. The second thing I would say is that the Web has a technical capacity that print does not have, and that is the ability to link. That's a huge advantage, because when we cite a statistic, for example, we don't just cite it, we link to a source. So you can follow the link, look at the data, and verify that the fact we're putting down there is correct. You can't do that in print. Now, Paul Krugman, for example, of the *New York Times*, misstates economic data, all the time. If he had to link to a source for the statistics he puts in his columns, he'd be out of business. But in print, you can't do that. So one of the things we always say is, hey, look, don't take our word for it, follow the links.

DEB REPYA: My husband is Joe Repya, in the military ...

SJ: May we just say that's Col. Joe Repya, who reupped to serve in Iraq at age fifty-nine.

REPYA: Right. Thank you, and he would love to be here. What do you think about the story about the Italian journalist? I feel like the press is leaving out a lot of information about, you know, her background and all that.

MP: Could you give a little background, either one of you?

JH: The story, of course, is the Italian journalist writes for a Communist magazine in Italy, who was apparently kidnapped by terrorists in Iraq and held for a while. The Italian government paid some millions of dollars, apparently, to secure her release and an Italian intelligence agent and a driver were apparently driving her from where they picked her up to the Baghdad airport. They'd not communicated to the American authorities or the Iraqi authorities that they were going to be doing this. They were going at a high rate of a speed. They approached a checkpoint and nobody knows exactly what happened, but they didn't stop. Soldiers shot at the vehicle to try to stop it, disable it, and the upshot was that the intelligence agent, tragically, was killed. The reporter was unhurt. She's now claiming that the soldiers riddled the car with 300 or 400 bullets and she's speculating that they may have been trying to kill her because they were afraid she was going to say what she knew about something. It's a sad story. But it seems clear to us that when the facts come out, the conclusion is going to be that, tragically, this car approached a checkpoint and for whatever reason didn't stop, and soldiers have instructions, if cars come speeding toward checkpoints and they ignore your signals to stop, it's likely to be a suicide bomber that's

going to blow up himself and you. And your job is to stop that vehicle, and that's what they did.

BOB PRENTISS: What do we know about the reliable source that these documents came from?

JH: : Well, you know, it's just a joke. Bill Burkett is a guy, he's the source of the documents. I could speculate, but I won't. He is a crank who has a grudge against the Texas, I think it's the Army National Guard. He was never in the Air National Guard. But they didn't pay some medical benefits, so he's carried on this grudge against the Texas, I think it's Army National Guard. And he hates President Bush. And for years he's been trying to kind of slander President Bush. What he told CBS originally was that a guy named Conn, who had served in the Air National Guard, gave him these documents and then left for Europe.

SJ: Do you make anything of that name, John?

JH: Yeah, two Ns, but I think one might have been more suitable. And one of the things the Thornburgh report criticized *60 Minutes* for was never making the slightest effort to locate Mr. Conn or even find out whether this man exists. Then, when the story started to fall apart, Dan Rather got on an airplane and flew to Texas and various people started interviewing Bill Burkett and he had a news story. He said, oh, that wasn't true about Mr. Conn. What really happened, he said, was that he got an anonymous phone call from a woman who said her name was Lucy Ramirez.

JH: Yes. And Lucy Ramirez told him to go to the Texas livestock show because she had something to give him. So he went to the Texas livestock show—that would be like going to the Minnesota State Fair—and he didn't meet anyone named Lucy Ramirez, but while he was just standing there, wondering what was going on, a man he'd never seen before walked up to him and handed him an envelope and walked away. So, he took the envelope home and he looked at it and it had these four documents in it. He made photocopies and burned the originals. Well, of course, what else would you do? Burn the originals! And, suffice it to say, the folks who tried to defend the unimpeachable source and defend this whole story are no more looking for the phantom Lucy Ramirez than O.J. Simpson is looking for the real killer.

MP: We have a question from **Sarah Mealey**, a member of the Board of Directors of Center of the American Experiment.

MEALEY: I do have a question, but first, I just want to say you guys are just heroes. You and all of the guys over at Fraters, at Captain's Quarters, at Shot in the Dark, all of you guys are heroes, because this is part of democracy, having individuals speak and hold the powerful accountable. Thank you for everything that you've done.

My question is, there was another incident that occurred that involved a senior executive, head of the news organization, as I understand it, at CNN, named Eason Jordan, that I thought was probably going to bubble up and be something even bigger than this whole

Rathergate. And I'm wondering if you can give some comment. Was there a chilling effect of the blogs at work when CNN promptly had Mr. Jordan resign?

SJ: John is part of this story. He got a call from a CNN publicist, off the record, right in the middle of that story, trying to keep Eason Jordan afloat. What Eason Jordan said, in Davos, Switzerland, at one of these fancy international conclaves, was that American soldiers had targeted journalists and had murdered a number of journalists in Iraq.

JH: First it was the blogger who challenged him and said, whoa, what's your evidence? And then Barney Frank, to his credit, got up and challenged him quite vigorously.

SJ: And the information regarding what Eason Jordan had said was posted on the website of that conference that was being run by a guy named Ronnie Arbovitz. And once it was posted, Hugh Hewitt publicized it, drew attention to it, and it created a firestorm on the Internet that resulted in Eason Jordan's departure from CNN. I think that story is like an iceberg; 90 percent of it is underwater. I don't know what the rest of the story is. It should be very clear that no one, including us, had asked for Eason Jordan to be fired. What was being asked for by all of the serious bloggers who wrote about it was for a copy of the videotape so we could see for ourselves what had been said. And they refused to release it.

JH: Let me just add to that. First, the people in Davos World Economic Forum said they would release it, but then they changed their minds and said they wouldn't. Glenn Reynolds, who does the wonderful, wonderful website Instapundit, I thought had the definitive comment. He said the bloggers would rather have seen the tape than have Eason Jordan resign. CNN, apparently, preferred to have Eason Jordan resign rather than have anybody see the tape.

MP: Scott and John, a final question. Is there anything about blogging that makes you nervous? That there's just too much information being sent electronically from place to place too quickly, that we don't have enough time to contemplate, seriously consider all the information out there? Is there anything about blogging that scares you, when it comes to a well-functioning American democracy?

SJ: From my own personal perspective, it bothers me that there's a lot of nuts out there. We hear from a lot of them and a lot of them, for example, with respect to the *60 Minutes* story, when Lucy Ramirez could not be located, have quickly come to the conclusion that Karl Rove must have been behind the documents. And like the story about the unable to authenticate these obviously bogus documents, you laugh at that, but that is still a theory, and I wonder tonight, with the wireless microphone I'm having to wear, whether I would need to disclaim Karl Rove guiding me on my remarks here tonight. But, Mitch, the question you ask is a good one. I have no deep thoughts beyond that.

JH: Well, Mitch, you know, classically, when people have defended the First Amendment for the last 200 and however many years, the idea has been that the cure for bad speech or wrong speech is more speech. Not regulated speech, not terminating speech. There are nuts out there, there's no doubt about it, and, as Scott says, we hear from a lot of them. Sometimes they mount organized campaigns against us. It's

unbelievable, the things that they do. But, again, if you're a defender of free speech, and we are, the solution to that problem is more speech, not less. And I think that as arguments compete in the marketplace and as people put forward evidence, it's not really all that difficult to figure out who's writing substantial stuff and reliable stuff and who are the crackpots. ■