

RATHER, from page 5

Journalists are also reluctant to ask hard questions closer to home — particularly about special interest money in Congress, and throughout Washington.

"While sporadically there is some coverage of it, there's not the persistent, constant coverage," Rather says.

Meanwhile, campaign contributions continue to rise. Rather estimates that they will hit \$5 billion this presidential campaign. "Who's going to give it? To whom are they going to give it? And what do they expect to get for it?"

Journalists are running scared, he argues. "As long as you move with the herd, move with the 'approved' narrative, you're not going to get in trouble. But if you break out from the herd, if you go against the 'approved' narrative, the retribution can be quick, and powerful."

For American journalists — and those around the world — Watergate remains a high water mark of the industry's ability to hold the powerful to account. At the time, Rather was CBS News' White House correspondent and was at the forefront of the coverage of the criminal scandal, which eventually toppled Nixon.

In his autobiography, *"Rather Outspoken: My Life in the News,"* Rather writes that prior to the break-in at the Democratic National Committee's Watergate headquarters in Washington D.C., his house was broken into. Nothing was taken, but Rather's files were rummaged through, and his family was warned by the wife of a Republican senator that the incident could have been politically motivated.

Two months later, the Watergate crisis detonated. Despite Rather's unnerving experience, he reported the story and asked tough questions of the Nixon administration. He refused to be intimidated, but he doesn't see himself as a courageous individual.

"I have no illusions of myself," Rather says. "Overwhelmingly, most of the time I haven't been as courageous as I should have been."

Rather worked at CBS News for more than four decades, but in 2004 he began to

notice an ominous change in the culture of the network. He and his colleagues were in the process of breaking the story of U.S. military officials committing human rights violations against detainees at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq.

"It was a very difficult story to cover, one of those stories that I found myself in the early stages saying, 'I hope (we) get told that this is not true,'" Rather says. "But developing that story, and trying to get the story on the air, for the first time in my time at CBS, I began to say to myself, 'something has changed here.'"

"This was by any objective analysis, a major story. To have a worldwide break on that kind of story, what news organization would pause?"

"The CBS of (Edward R.) Murrow, and the CBS of Will Paley... they would have hated the story for what it was, but they would have said really quickly, 'this is a story that needs to go on the air, and it needs to go on the air now.'"

Unfortunately, Rather says, William Paley no longer owned CBS. Sumner Redstone had taken over the organization when it merged with Viacom in 2000 and his news philosophy was very different than that of Murrow, Paley... and Rather.

"We eventually got the Abu Ghraib story on the air because some of our sources began to say, 'Listen, if you're not going to run it, we'll go elsewhere,'" Rather says. "But then, very quickly behind that, came the Bush National Guard story."

And with it, the end of Rather's time at CBS News.

Rather's story alleged that President George W. Bush used his father's influence as a prominent Texas congressman to get him placed into a 'champagne unit' in order

to avoid combat during the Vietnam War, only to go AWOL from the unit for about a year with no explanation. The story ran in September 2004, in the midst of a heated presidential campaign between Bush and Massachusetts Sen. John F. Kerry (who had been a Navy speedboat captain on the

Mekong Delta).

The story exploded. Accusations were made that the documents Rather had used were forged, and his source later admitted that he lied to him. While Rather says that all of the other evidence he used still supported the facts he reported, he apologized on the air.

A year after reporting the story, he announced his retirement from CBS News, departing the network in 2005. He had been its anchor for 24 years. He later sued Viacom and CBS News executives, alleging that they made him the scapegoat in the Bush National Guard story, but his case was dismissed.

Rather says that in the case of the Bush Air National Guard story, CBS abandoned its long-held tradition of defending their reporters and their work and left him out to dry.

"The history and tradition of CBS News is that it stood behind its reporters and their stories," Rather says. "Murrow with [Joseph] McCarthy, Murrow and smoking, Murrow and Harvest of Shame: these are stories that gave the corporate side of the network difficulty, but the point is, they may not have liked them, but they backed them."

"Coverage of the civil rights movement, coverage of the Vietnam War, the Watergate period... It was the history and the tradition," Rather says. "It was what made CBS News the great worldwide news organization."

Despite everything that happened, Rather

says the basic facts of the Bush story were accurate, and that he still stands by the story today.

"I made a mistake; I make a lot of mistakes (but) the Bush story was true."

Ahead of the release of "Truth," the movie that tells the story of his downfall, Rather says things may have ended differently had he seen the way the wind was blowing sooner. "I didn't recognize it soon enough, I didn't recognize the depths of it soon enough. And when it came time to respond to it, in the wake of the Abu Ghraib and the Bush story, I wasn't quick enough, smart enough, or good enough to mount the kinds of response that might have headed it off."

The film is based on the memoir of former 60 Minutes Producer Mary Mapes, *"Truth and Duty: The Press, the President, and the Privilege of Power."* For fans of heroic liberal journalists kicking against the system, the casting of Redford will recall the classic film of the Watergate affair, 1976's *All the President's Men*, in which Redford starred as Bob Woodward and Dustin Hoffman as Carl Bernstein. Having spoken to the dashing Redford about the film, Rather told the New York Post that the casting has made him feel "humble".

All the President's Men was the inspiration for thousands of young people to become investigative journalists, to follow in the footsteps of The Washington Post's courageous Woodward and Bernstein. It remains to be seen whether "Truth" can similarly help reinvigorate the industry that Rather loves.

Whatever the response to the movie, Rather has already distinguished himself as one of the most influential journalists of our time. "I enjoy a great deal about what I do," he says. "I have a passion for work. I have a lot of flaws, and may have made mistakes, but I have a great passion for covering news."

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