

If ever there was an example of the biblical injunction that “pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall,” the dismissal of four CBS News employees (five if you count Dan Rather’s impending retirement) is a good example. The 224-page report on the malfunction of 60 Minutes Wednesday’s story about President Bush and his National Guard service provides example after example of hubris overwhelming common sense and of people who should have known better not knowing better. But I also doubt that the recommendations in the report will really solve the problem.

Ousted or asked to resign were the senior vice president who supervised CBS News’ primetime programs, the show’s executive producer and his deputy and the show’s producer, Mary Mapes. Mapes was fired, and with good reason. In television news, it’s not the on-air correspondent who does the reporting, the fact-checking, the verification, the setting up interviews; it’s the producer.

The report by former Attorney General (and former Pennsylvania Governor) Dick Thornburgh and retired Associated Press president Louis D. Boccardi details the many screw-ups (the panel calls them “missteps”) along the way, but they all come down to hubris on the part of Mapes and Rather. In fact, one of the more startling comments in the report notes that while Rather did apologize for the report and did stop defending it, “he did not fully agree with this decision and still believes that the content is accurate.” The panel says it is “troubled by these conflicting statements.”

The report lays out the numerous times Mapes (described as having “fervent faith” in the story) was advised that maybe the information she had that Bush received preferential treatment getting into the National Guard during the Vietnam War was wrong. Rather than adhere to an important rule of journalism, generally attributed to some nameless journalist in Chicago roughly a century ago, “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.” Put another way, trust but verify and make sure your sources of verification are solid.

A related problematic reporting method was relying on people’s memories. You need only to get together at a family reunion and talk about an incident in the past to see how inconsistent and faulty memories are.

Then there’s the cover-up, about which Rather should, better than others given his experience reporting on Watergate, know it is sometimes worse than the crime. The Thornburgh-Boccardi report says that once its report was questioned, CBS, rather than check it out, circled the wagons in a way that “mishandled and compounded the damage done.”

In laying out the missteps at CBS News, the report is a roadmap of what went wrong. And the panel offers up 16 recommendations for management, ranging from the creation of a new senior standards and practices position that is outside the 60 Minutes Wednesday’s structure to the protocol (its word) that CBS News personnel be reminded from

regularly to check the archives “to determine whether information about sources or other relevant background information might be available.”

I’m sure many people in journalism and journalism education will turn the panel’s recommendations into a case study for future journalists. But I am doubtful that worthy as they are they will head off a similar problem in the future.

Among other things, CBS News, according to the panel, already had published internal standards based on accuracy and fairness, and, according to the panel, failed to follow them. More rules aren’t going to do any good if people aren’t going to follow them. The folks at 60 Minutes Wednesday didn’t follow the rules. It’s as simple as that. They paid the price, as they should.

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