

They Shoot Cats, Don't They?

Recollecting the time Mike Wallace and *60 Minutes* actually apologized.

By Quin Hillyer



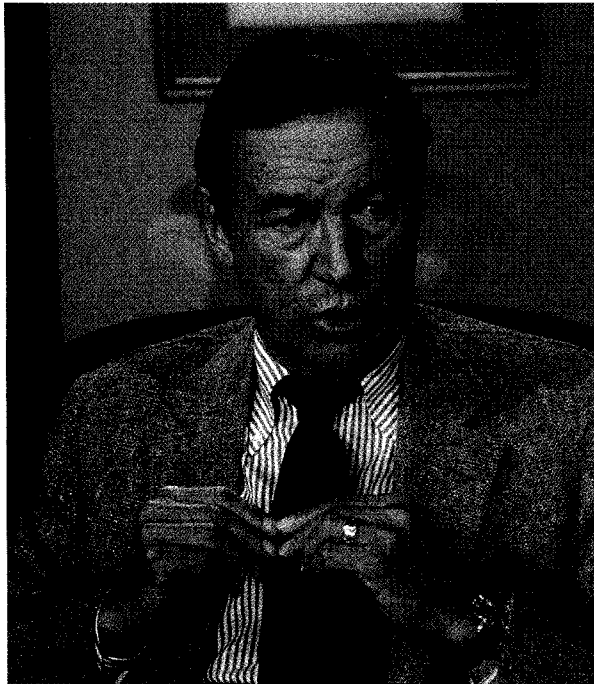
WE WERE TOLD IT WAS THE first time Mike Wallace had ever apologized to an elected official on air on *60 Minutes*. For all I know, it still might be the only time. And 15 years later, in this age of Obama when the establishment media is hostile to conservatives, the episode still can teach lessons about how to fight back with the truth.

If the story is straight enough, there do remain honest liberal reporters and columnists who will come to your aid.

The year was 1993. I was working as a press secretary for U.S. Rep. Bob Livingston, of Louisiana, a strongly pro-military but carefully budget-cutting veteran of the Defense Appropriations Subcommit-

tee. Our top legislative aide, Paul Cambon, told me that *60 Minutes* had been snooping around a small medical-research project back in Louisiana funded through a military grant.

The medical researcher was seeking better ways to treat brain injuries of the sort soldiers often suffer. The problem, Cambon said, was that the researcher's thesis did not seem terribly original. It had something to do, as I best recall, with how some brain injuries that otherwise would not be deadly could cause the heart to stop beating. The idea—again, this is from memory—was to show that emergency medical personnel should work just as fast to ensure and stabilize respiration as they do to treat the site of the head injury itself. Cambon told me, though, that other specialists had informed him that these same

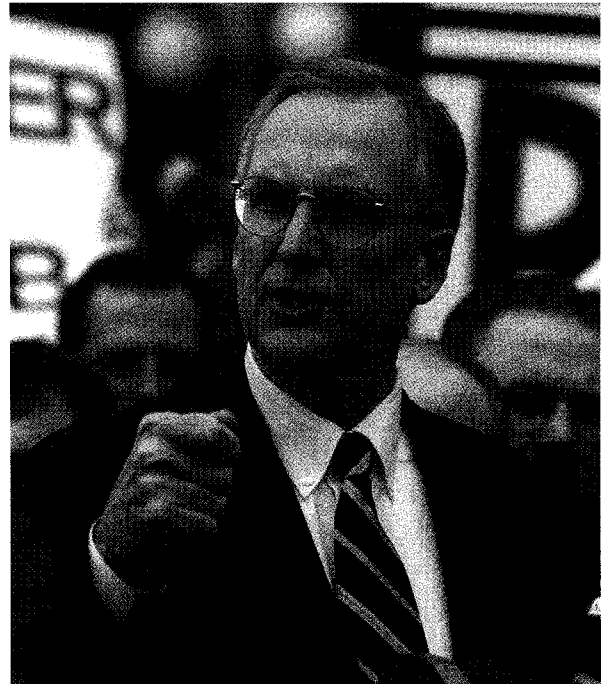


findings had already been proved nearly a full century before, in the late 1890s.

Meanwhile, this particular research was drawing protests because—get this—the doctor’s method involved repeatedly shooting cats in the head with BB pellets. The cats would be placed in a head vise so the doctor could precisely aim the pellets, and then...*Boom!* Then he’d study the results. Animal rights activists, for obvious reasons, were outraged. And since this research was being funded by the U.S. government, in Livingston’s backyard, through the military over which Livingston’s subcommittee had jurisdiction...well, some of the protests were aimed in Livingston’s direction.

Again, this was *shooting cats*, on the taxpayer dime. Oddly enough, though, *60 Minutes* wasn’t interested in blasting Livingston for allowing the cat shooting. The TV show wasn’t outraged that the goal of this cat shooting reportedly was to prove something already understood for 95 years. Instead, *60 Minutes* wanted to know why Livingston was *not* supporting the cat-shooting experiments. The news magazine’s staff seemed to assume that soldiers’ lives would be dependent on this one scientist’s experiments.

What Livingston had done, as a careful appropriator, was pretty standard stuff. In the most recent military funding bill, he had inserted language suspending that project’s grant until the research could



be scientifically peer-reviewed. He didn’t kill the project entirely. He just caused a pause so he could learn if the experiments actually had real military/medical usefulness. If not, then it was both a waste of taxpayer money and outrageous cruelty.

For whatever reason, *60 Minutes* was lining up with the cat shooter. (We never nailed down rumors that a CBS News producer was related to somebody close to the scientist.) All we knew was that the show’s snoopers seemed intent on a morality play in which a purportedly pro-military congressman was blocking research that could save soldiers’ lives.

Bizarre.

ANYWAY, CAMBON’S INFORMATION proved accurate. A *60 Minutes* assistant producer finally contacted our office directly. To this day, I can remember the attitude: aggressive, imperious, accusatory. No matter what I said about how a temporary suspension of the cat shooting was just simple common sense, it fell on deaf ears. A Republican congressman was in the show’s sights—oddly enough, not for being too heartless, but for supposedly pandering to touchy-feely animal rights extremists. And the producer was demanding an on-camera interview with Livingston.

I drew on my experience as a research assistant for a widely used text on journalistic ethics, *The Virtuous Journalist* by Stephen Klaidman and Tom

Beauchamp, in which CBS News and *60 Minutes* had been used in several case studies of what *not* to do. I advised Livingston that he should demand the right to have our own camera tape any interview ourselves, so we could have irrefutable evidence if the show unfairly spliced several interview segments together, out of context, to make him look bad.

Livingston declined. He had nothing to hide, he said. Tell the producer he would gladly do the interview—as long as it was aired either live or entirely unedited. Pre-taped and edited, no. Live or full-length, fine.

I called the producer back with our terms. She laughed nastily. She said I'd regret it.

I went to work. With Cambon's help, I gathered every conceivable document on the cat project. I spent days putting together pages of evidence showing that everything we were doing was prudent, unremarkable, fair to both sides, and representative of good fiscal stewardship. I then offered the report to the producer. She scoffed.

Some days later, CBS star Mike Wallace himself called me. He pretended to be my buddy. It was a tough act to carry off when his words carried a veiled threat.

Speaking in a faux-avuncular voice, Wallace said almost these exact words: "Look, how old are you?... Just 28? Well, let me give you some advice. You seem like a smart young man. But let me tell you what I've learned in 50 years in this business. What I've learned is that you're always better off answering all the questions. And you're always better off if you cooperate with people who have a lot more experience than you. There's a good reason why I and *60 Minutes* have such an excellent reputation. Just cooperate with us, and you'll be just fine."

Gee, how nice.

I reiterated our terms. Live and unedited, or no dice. Wallace wasn't happy. He said he never agreed to terms like that, "not even for Henry Kissinger." He demanded that Livingston call him.

Long story short, Livingston did call back. But only after I was set up to record the phone call, secretly. (It was perfectly legal in D.C. to record one's own phone calls.) If *60 Minutes* could do some of the ambush jobs it was known for, we darn well would ensure that we were protected.

On the phone with Wallace, Livingston repeated his terms, including, quite explicitly, his offer to go on camera if his conditions were met; he also outlined his concerns about the tenor of the show's

investigation. Wallace tried repeatedly to change Livingston's mind. He reiterated his line about Kissinger—and said he wouldn't agree to those terms for the pope or the president either. Livingston wouldn't budge, and encouraged Wallace to read the report I had written. Wallace was furious.

A MONTH OR SO LATER, after we sent a certified letter repeating our concerns about the story's directions and Livingston's offer to go on camera live or unedited, the segment on the cat-shooting finally aired. As expected, it was a hit job. It made the scientist sound like a saintly Albert Schweitzer. It made the protesters, none of whom amounted to any political threat to Livingston's safe seat, sound more extreme than Greenpeace. Worse, it used footage of animal rights activists in high lather who were protesting some *other* subject at some *other* place—but with a voice-over making it seem like these were the protesters against the cat project. The deliberate impression was to make Livingston sound like a scared congressman pandering, fearfully, to those protesters.

Oh—and Wallace said, on air, that he had repeatedly offered Livingston a chance to discuss the situation, but that Livingston refused.

Not, mind you, that Livingston had offered to be interviewed live or unedited, but instead as if Livingston had totally ducked all questions.

The next day, Livingston called Wallace and chewed him out. Again, my tape was running, again secretly.

Said Wallace: "One way in which you're dead right, and I apologize to you for it and I don't know how the hell it got through, and that's the business of, ah, not saying 'live and unedited'—in other words, that you didn't want to go on camera to tell us....My friend, I apologize to you, I really do. I'm ashamed of myself because you told it to me....It's unfair. Because you were perfectly willing to go on....That was just dishonest of me, and that was stupid of me."

Livingston told Wallace that if he had to choose again what to do about the cat-shooting research, he "would have done it exactly the same way."

Responded Wallace: "I don't disagree with you."

I went to work. I produced a 27-page, footnoted, single-spaced refutation of the entire *60 Minutes* report. Fact after fact, citation after citation (including the misleading protester footage), I laid out the blatant dishonesty. I sent it to *60 Minutes* demanding a retraction. I sent it out to a bunch of reporters. And

I noted (without mentioning our audiotapes) that Wallace had lied when he said we had refused to cooperate. But no public apology came to match the apology in the private phone call.

Amazingly enough, *60 Minutes* re-ran the segment in July. *With no corrections. Not one.*

THIS TIME, we called the president of CBS News. Bob played our audiotape for him. And then played it again. There was Wallace apologizing and admitting to having been “dishonest” and “stupid.” And yet the show had run again, without correction. It was clear we had a slam-dunk legal case if we wanted to press it.

The CBS president was irate at his own team. He made that clear. The tape did the trick. Apparently the news president then came down hard on Wallace. Really hard. Wallace soon called back. His voice was shaky. “Well, um, you know something? You’re a better man than I am, Congressman.” He promised to go on the air and apologize to the entire country. Then, after more of what can only be described as groveling, Wallace said this:

“You can get this on your tape recorder—I wish you told me you had a tape recorder going; that would have been the gentlemanly thing to do, the first time...”

Livingston interrupted, lowering the boom: “It would have been, but then I didn’t think that I was necessarily dealing with a gentleman.”

Wallace: “Well, in any case...”

Livingston: “And frankly, you’ve proven me right.”

Bingo. You could almost hear the phone line sizzle. Wallace had no answer. There was no good answer. Livingston was correct.

Yes, Wallace did apologize on the air—not for a whole host of other falsehoods that I had detailed, but for saying Livingston had flat-out refused to be interviewed on camera. But the apology was clear, unambiguous. It left no wiggle room. We now had it, on TV, that Wallace had wronged Livingston.

And the apology for one part of the report had the same effect as an apology for all of it. Columnists and radio hosts, all over the country, rushed to

Livingston’s defense. The *Washington Post*’s famous peacenik Colman McCarthy, a man who ordinarily would agree with Livingston on nothing, was especially strong. His thorough, concise, and eloquent column called Livingston an “honorable” congressman who had done the right thing throughout.

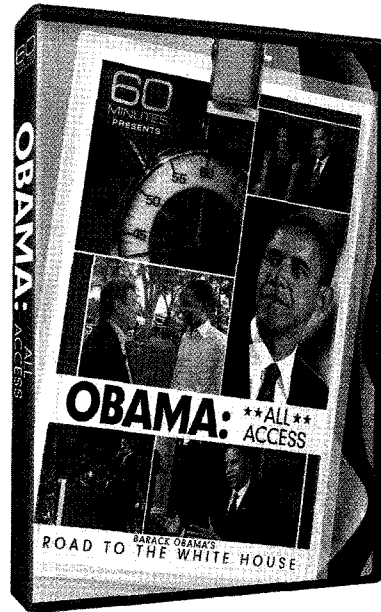
ONE NOTE, THOUGH, about the McCarthy piece. It was the only one that really covered all the other dishonesties in the *60 Minutes* report. It was the only one that made real use of my 27-page manifesto. A number of journalists defended Livingston, but only McCarthy really explained the underlying dispute. The one thing that drew the attention of the rest of them was the simple, straightforward apology, based on the original simple, straightforward demand that a TV show not splice an interview out of context.

I, the press aide, had forgotten the nature of the press. But Livingston remembered: Keep it simple. Keep it straight. Keep it absolutely clear. And play it smart by collecting evidence that cannot possibly be denied.

Conservatives today are dealing with an even more hostile establishment press—but it is a press that treats President Barack Obama as a savior. Witness *60 Minutes* itself, both last December and in March, dropping its usual hardball tactics and offering a friendly forum to Obama with nothing but puffball questions. In contrast, Obama’s critics come off as obstructionist trolls.

In fighting those media tactics, conservatives all too often forget the same lessons I forgot. They were the lessons of concision and clarity that Ronald Reagan always taught. They are lessons that conservatives will need if they want to get their message out and make it stick—because, when dealing with the establishment’s media, we aren’t necessarily dealing with gentlemen. ❁

Quin Hillyer is an associate editor of the Washington Examiner and a senior editor of The American Spectator. This is the fourth in an occasional series of his political reminiscences that hold lessons for today’s challenges. He can be reached at qhillyer@gmail.com.





Clubbing the Moderates

Have conservative primary challengers shrunk the GOP?

by W. James Antle III

HUNTING “RINOS” HAS BECOME a favorite conservative pastime. But as the party struggles to avoid a 60-seat Democratic majority in the Senate, shutting off filibusters and meaningful debate on reams of liberal legislation, is it still a productive one? Assuming Norm Coleman’s legal fortunes—which are at this writing dire—don’t soon improve, Democrats will be one seat away from that magic number. Even if 2010 is otherwise a good year for Republicans, the GOP is nevertheless expected to defend 19 Senate seats to the Democrats’ 17, and Republican retirees outnumber departing Democrats 5 to 1.

While playing defense in Florida, Ohio, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Kentucky, Republicans need a few states where they can go on the offensive. One unexpected opportunity has emerged in deep-blue Connecticut, where Sen. Chris Dodd is paying the price for his role in the financial meltdown and his embarrassing 2008 presidential campaign. Former Rep. Rob Simmons appears to be the strongest challenger, having already taken a commanding lead in the polls.

But Simmons is no fire-breathing conservative. His lifetime rating from the American Conservative Union is 55 percent, middling for just any member of Congress, astonishingly low for a Republican. What’s a conservative to do? The problem presents itself again in Pennsylvania, where Sen. Arlen Specter is standing for a sixth term. *National Review* once declared Specter the “worst Republican senator” and he cast a pivotal vote for President Obama’s \$787 billion stimulus package to remind conservative Pennsylvanians why.

Enter Club for Growth president Pat Toomey, who looks likely to challenge Specter in the Republican primary for a second time. In their 2004 matchup, it took the combined strength of President Bush and Sen. Rick Santorum to shove Specter

across the finish line by less than 1 percent of the vote. This time around there have been conflicting poll results, but no reputable survey has found Specter attracting the support of more than a third of Republicans. Yet the incumbent does much better with independents and Democrats, suggesting he would still be formidable in November if his candidacy can make it that far.

The dilemma has prompted a new round of questions about conservative primary challengers in general. Outfits like Toomey’s Club for Growth have never been popular with liberal Republicans, who want the freedom to raise taxes and prefer pale pastels to bold colors. But even now some complain they are hurting the party. Former Federal Elections Commission chairman Bradley Smith charged that “few have done more to run northeastern moderates out of the party or worked harder to shrink the party’s base.” Blogger and *American Conservative* columnist Daniel Larison calls them the “Club for Democratic Growth.”

Are conservative parasites killing their Republican host? Let’s begin with one of the biggest show-downs in history between a more moderate GOP incumbent and a conservative challenger: the 1976 contest between Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan. Ford was an unelected president, Reagan a 65-year-old former California governor and Hollywood actor. Ford eventually prevailed in the drawn-out primary struggle, but ended up making concessions on the Republican platform and replacing Nelson Rockefeller on the national ticket. He was also upstaged by Reagan at the Republican National Convention.

Ford went on to lose the general election to Jimmy Carter by a narrow margin. You can find political analysts who contend that Reagan’s primary challenge, rather than pardons or Poland, hurt Ford in November. Ford himself was said to believe some