Feature

DROPPING THE ANCHOR

He was the voice of America, for over half a century talking to the nation via the evening news. Then a scoop backfired – and Dan Rather became the subject of the story himself. Ariel Leve reports

PORTRAIT: MARTIN SCHOELLER/CORBIS

Try to imagine you are Dan Rather. All you've ever wanted is to tell a story. You begin working as a radio and television reporter in Texas in the 1950s. You work hard, you're confident. In 1961 you are hired by CBS News. It is the big time, a heady environment, a network with character, moulded by the revered broadcaster Edward R Murrow, your hero. You are surrounded by scholarly correspondents who have style and experience. You want the approval of your peers and they have high standards. You up your game, you are loyal, hard-working and ambitious. You want to be one of them.

You report on big events. The assassination of John F Kennedy, Vietnam, Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation. You build your reputation and gain authority. CBS News is your home. After 20 years growing a following, in 1981 you take over as anchor of the evening news from another legend, Walter Cronkite.

From this moment on, you are as recognisable as the president of the United States – and the global communications revolution will beam your face to millions of homes by satellite and cable around the world. You achieve power, influence and notoriety, not to mention the multi-million-dollar salary. At 6.30pm, five nights a week, you become not just the face of American news but the face of America. You command huge budgets. You may be in the studio, or you might decide to take the whole news crew off to the wedding of Diana and Charles, a papal funeral, or Baghdad. You will present the news of the world to millions of Americans – and, with an avuncular and affectionate, even folksy sign-off, you will send them to bed reassured that no matter how bad it is out there, they'll be safe until tomorrow. You are not just the network's anchor: some regard you as the *nation's* anchor, a calming, trustworthy voice in a world of fear, hate and dispute.

You are infallible, unimpeachable – and then, in 2004, a scoop lands on your desk. With ⋙→

Below: Richard Nixon talks to Dan Rather for a CBS News special, January 1972. Right: presidential candidate George W Bush prepares for an interview with Rather, July 2000

your famous knitted brow and resonant concern, you tell America what you know. But this story explodes in your face: it shreds a reputation built over 50 years and eviscerates your world. Your career, as one of the biggest influences on what America has thought for half a century, is dead. Was it suicide? Or was it murder?

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"People will scoff. But I always thought I tried to reach a person or a couple," says Dan Rather, explaining how he built up an audience in 13m American homes. Such was his influence that if he wore a pullover on a story, it would become news itself, to be deconstructed: "Is Dan Rather trying to project a warmer image?" Viewer approval meant ratings, meant advertising revenue, meant millions. In 1987 he walked off set when a prolonged tennis match threatened to delay the evening news, and for six minutes CBS broadcast "dead air" while producers searched for him. He appeared on The Simpsons, and his unshaven face reporting from Afghanistan kicked off the recent hit movie Charlie Wilson's War. He wept on the Letterman show in the wake of 9/11, and REM dedicated a rock anthem to him in 1994. Rightwingers branded him "liberal" and democrats regarded him as a crusader.

Dan Rather became a part of American folklore. He was the longest-serving anchor of American news – there for nearly 25 years. But at CBS he was also the managing editor, the man who was personally responsible. It was a role he sought – and when the story blew up in his face, who else was there to blame?

In September 2004, Rather delivered a piece for the 60 Minutes programme on President Bush's service record with the Texas Air National Guard. There were memos written by Bush's former commanding officer, the late Jerry B Killian, that said Bush's military record had been sugar-coated and he'd received special treatment.

The aftermath centred on the authenticity of the documents. They were attacked by right-wing fanatics for being forgeries and the mainstream media picked up the story. Rather defended his report, but when authenticity could not be proven, he made an apology on the air, saying: "… if I knew then what I know now, I would not have gone ahead with the story."

Was Rather hoisted with his own petard, the man responsible for the scoop that couldn't be proved?

What happened next is complicated. The simplified version is that CBS commissioned an independent investigation, led by the former US attorney-general Dick Thornburgh, a Bush family friend. It became obvious to Rather his employers were not backing him up. He was told to cease efforts to prove the documents were authentic and was interrogated before the commission. Rather believes that Sumner Redstone – chairman of Viacom, which was then CBS's parent company – wanted him out. And that this was an orchestrated campaign.

Was it political pressure from the Bush administration that CBS bowed to, an opportunity to boost ratings by dropping the stubborn ageing anchor for a younger, fresher face? Or was Rather hoisted with his own petard, the man responsible for the scoop that couldn't be proved, who had to fall on his sword?

In January 2005, the producer of the story and two other people were fired. Rather retired as anchor in March of that year. After that, he was rarely seen on the air, and in June 2006 it was announced he would be leaving the network. It was not an amicable parting.

Then, in September 2007, Rather came roaring back into the public eye. He filed a $70m lawsuit against CBS, Viacom and Sumner Redstone; the CBS chairman, Leslie Moonves; and the former CBS News president Andrew Heyward. He is suing them for breach of contract and breach of fiduciary duties – for making him the fall guy in the Killian story and destroying his reputation. It's a giant legal battle that some believe takes courage to fight, but others believe is the foolish and hubristic act of a man with damaged pride.

Why is he doing this? He is 76, he has made his millions, and he has been picked up by an ambitious young cable network. He will say, somewhat unconvincingly, that it's not about vindication. "I don't think there's anything to be vindicated for. My reputation has taken a hit – no question about it. Specific things that happened with this were not right. The public wasn't told what really went on at CBS News. I didn't ⟶

LEFT: GETTY. RIGHT: CORBIS

Rather was satirised in cartoons in the press after 'Rathergate', the scandal over the Bush documents

know." But it will be clear that it's personal, too. "When I was at CBS I gave it everything I had. And they gave me a lot. And when the heat got on – the political heat got on – I think the record is clear that they didn't do what they told me they were going to do. They didn't do what, over a long period of time, there was a mutual understanding about what we would do.

"There's an issue of importance involved here. That is, this increasing, quiet sometimes, alliance of big government with big corporations to influence news coverage needs to be brought out in the daylight for people to see."

Then those blue-grey eyes, which stared out into American homes, will look right at me and it will be a little bit heartbreaking. "I believed what they told me."

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Just off Times Square is an office building named Bush Towers, where, slightly absurdly, Dan Rather now works. The lobby is not shabby, but it's not the modern gleaming skyscraper with supersonic security that he was used to, either. There is a lone guard at the front desk and walls in the hallway that could use a fresh coat of paint. This is the New York office of Dan Rather Reports. He has a new home, a place where he has creative and editorial control – an hour-long investigative news program for HDNet, a high-definition cable and satellite channel launched in 2001, with 10m subscribers over cable and satellite in the US and Canada. Since there are no viewership numbers that exist for high-definition networks, it's hard to gauge what the audience is for Dan Rather Reports. To get a sense of what the numbers might be, I contact the network's president, the billionaire Marc Cuban. "Yes," he says, "there are numbers, but we don't publish them. The programme is doing very well for us." Translation: we support Dan Rather no matter what.

Behind a nondescript door at the end of the hallway is a modest work area filled with cubicles and casually dressed young people. The atmosphere is unpretentious and collegiate. The environment is remarkably low-tech. There is nothing slick or showy, no wall-to-wall plasma TV screens showing 24-hour news, no glossy framed photographs of network stars, no high-powered executives rushing around looking important. It is the opposite of what you imagine CBS News to be.

Rather is on his way, and I am led into his corner office to wait. It could pass for a sitting room in a B&B. Blue carpet, crimson sofa, wooden chairs and a coat rack, an old-fashioned oil painting, a mini fridge and a large leather-rimmed desk with not much on it. It looks like the office of someone who doesn't spend much time in the office. On the wall is a framed photograph of REM. It is signed by Michael Stipe and reads: "To Dan, you hung the moon, you rule the universe." And on the pale blue door, hand-painted in black, is a quote: "Go tell the Spartans, thou who passest by,/That here, obedient to their laws, we lie." They are the

'My reputation has taken a hit – no question. The public wasn't told what really went on at CBS'

words of Simonides, engraved on the memorial to the 300 Spartans who died at the Battle of Thermopylae. Later I read that this had been written on his door at CBS. It is a quote that has inspired him since youth, and he took it to mean loyalty to the very end.

To understand Dan Rather is to understand the significance of loyalty. It's perhaps his greatest virtue and his Achilles heel. But how could he have got so far in life and never been burnt? He believes in the unwritten code that he and his colleagues look out for one another, and it is a theme he often returns to.

"He is incredibly loyal to those close to him," says Wayne Nelson, his friend of 25 years. Nelson first met Rather at the CBS News bureau in Dallas. He tells me he is having more fun now and seems more relaxed than he has ever seen him. They produce 42 programmes a year for HDNet. He describes Rather as an old-school Texas gentleman who wakes up every day wanting to break a big story. "And this is a guy who could be fly-fishing in Montana for the rest of his life if he wanted to." So why isn't he? It's not just about healing his bruised reputation. At 76, he needs a purpose.

After a few minutes, Rather approaches, looking as though he is still camera-ready. He is a robust man with thick silver hair, dressed immaculately in a dark pinstriped bespoke suit. After a polite introduction and an apology for being late, he takes off his jacket. He is wearing an unwrinkled white shirt and maroon braces. There is a frayed reporter's notepad sticking out of his back trouser pocket.

He sits down on the sofa next to me. "I was taught that at the core of American journalism… that a public journal was a public trust operated with a public interest," he says, his voice is barely above a whisper. "When that began to fade, the politicians realised they could exert pressure on the conglomerate leadership and have that seep down to the newsrooms. Now you have a situation where if 'candidate A' doesn't like what he's hearing on Network 3, his campaign does the following: they begin to scream 'bias', they put the pressure on the very top corporate leaders and mount a campaign with shareholders and get their way. It doesn't happen in every instance, but it happens too often."

The previous night, the Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin had given her first interview to Charlie Gibson, a former competitor of Rather's at ABC News. Rather is neutral in his assessment of her. "She came off well." She is "an effective candidate". Perhaps because of the lawsuit, he feels it's best to remain objective. Throughout his career he has been accused of having a liberal bias, so the implications of having an opinion on Palin could be dangerous. Instead, he is gracious about the job Gibson did. He knows first-hand all the agreements and arrangements that must have taken place behind the scenes for it to have happened, and there is a sense of resignation when he speaks about how access is controlled as part of the leverage politicians have over

TOP: COX AND FORKUM

Left: in the CBS News studios in New York City. Below: reporting from Vietnam, 1966

broadcasters in deciding whether to favour their studios with their presence. "The McCain campaign used an interesting word – they said, 'We will consider whether there is respect and deference.' Respect is one thing. Deference is quite another. It was an unfortunate choice of words. Reporters shouldn't be deferent."

Rather has been a reporter for nearly 60 years. In spite of his affluence and status, this is how he defines himself. He is still trying to uncover the truth, only now he is the story. He has said that if he wins his lawsuit, he will donate a chunk of the money to the cause of investigative reporting. He is a man of strong principles whose principles may be his downfall. But he is also conscious of not wanting to come across as a martyr. He is not comfortable with discussing his feelings, but slowly he reveals himself.

What distinguishes him most is an anachronistic quality. As he talks about his early career, it is clear how he was shaped by the values of those he worked with. He went to work at CBS when it was owned by William S Paley, who, he says, "was the best of them. His attitude towards news was: CBS was an entertainment company, news is a public service. He wasn't perfect. But the record shows he was very good at keeping air space between the corporate entity and the entertainment properties – the biggest moneymakers – between that and news".

Paley stood up to those who tried to manipulate the news. And he supported his newsmen. When Ed Murrow took on Senator Joe McCarthy, Paley backed him. "At CBS News, the history had been, we back our people," says Rather, emphasising the last three words. "The company had changed in ways I didn't realise. I had believed that they would stand up for their people and back stories. And I was wrong." Being wrong isn't something he is used to. And even though he told himself he shouldn't be surprised, that this is life, it was the way he was treated that was hard to get past. I read him a quote that was reported at the time. "I used to be Dan Rather," he had said. He pauses. "Well, I did say that. It was an effort to be light. Intended to be self-deprecating." Americans aren't used to self-deprecation, and it's easy to see how Rather's dry sense of humour could be misinterpreted.

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There are conflicting ideas as to who Dan Rather really is. Critics say he is all about presentation, playing the hero and looking the part. He leaves the room for a moment, and when he returns he is smiling. What he wanted, he says, is a glass of milk. "I've always had a weakness for milk," he tells me. "When I first got married I was drinking at least a gallon of milk a day. Back then, it was bottles."

There are conflicting ideas about who Dan Rather really is. Critics say he is all about presentation

He has been married to the same woman, Jean, since 1957. She too is from Texas. They have two adult children. His social life these days consists of dinners with his wife and another couple, and attending the Little League softball games with his grandson in the park. He drinks alcohol "in moderation", with bourbon his preferred drink. "I'll tell you a story," he says. What follows is a reminiscence from early 1965, when he had been posted to the London bureau of CBS News. Charles Collingwood, a protégé of Ed Murrow, became his mentor. Collingwood, Rather tells me, "had wonderful manners, a great grasp of history – and he belonged to a club". He brought Rather to this private club and showed him round. He taught him to drink Scotch with no ice, and educated him about the different malts. Then he took him to Savile Row and Rather received his first handmade suit. It took seven fittings and he thought it was a big waste of time. "I also thought it was astronomically expensive," he says, "way out of my price range."

But it turned out that it wore well and he could take it anywhere – steam it from a hot shower and hang it up. Rather followed the lead of his mentor. And as he tells this story, he reveals how important it was for him to be presentable. He was shaped by an old-school gentleman's world of bespoke suits and malt whisky and elegant manners. It was about refinement, backed by dependability. "When I came back from Vietnam," he says. "I was told the chairman wants to have lunch with me. I mentioned this to Collingwood and he said, 'That's good – he wants to talk to you about the war.' On the day of it, he came by my office early in the morning, looked at me and said, 'You're not wearing that suit, are you? Put on the London suit.' I went home and changed. Mr Paley tended to judge people – he knew the difference between machine-made and handmade buttonholes. Machine-made buttonholes are all the same. If you look closely you can tell." He takes a sip of coffee and continues: "I noticed the first thing he did – his eyes went down to my shirtsleeves." A picture begins to emerge. Maybe Rather's investment in his appearance is less about pretence and vanity and playing a role than about tradition and affection for a bygone era.

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After things soured at CBS, he denies he was depressed. "I wasn't dancing in the aisles, but no, I wasn't depressed." His tendency, he says, "is to think, 'Okay, you got knocked down – get

LEFT AND RIGHT: GETTY

IN BRIEF

The controversy over the Killian documents (dubbed Memogate or Rathergate) involved six documents critical of George W Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard in 1972-73. Four were presented in a CBS broadcast of September 8, 2004, less than two months before the presidential election. A CBS producer, Mary Mapes, obtained the documents from Bill Burkett, a former officer in the Texas Army National Guard, while pursuing a story about the Bush-military-service controversy. The papers were purportedly made by the late Jerry B Killian, Bush's commander. Rather said on air, "We are told [they] were taken from Lieutenant Colonel Killian's personal files", incorrectly asserting that "the material" had been authenticated by experts at CBS. Typography experts claimed the documents were forgeries. It may not be possible to authenticate them without the originals, which Burkett says he burnt after faxing CBS.

The authenticity of the documents was challenged within hours on the internet, with questions about alleged anachronisms in the typography. CBS

'We should not have used the documents – it was a mistake'

and Rather defended usage of the documents for two weeks, but scrutiny from other sources questioned the documents' validity and led to a public repudiation on September 20, 2004.

Rather stated, "if I knew then what I know now I would not have gone ahead with the story as it was aired, and I certainly would not have used the documents in question". The president of CBS News, Andrew Heyward, said: "Based on what we now know, CBS News cannot prove that the documents are authentic, which is the only acceptable journalistic standard to justify using them in the report. We should not have used them. That was a mistake, which we deeply regret."

Months later, a CBS-appointed panel led by Dick Thornburgh and Louis Boccardi criticised both the initial CBS News segment and CBS's "strident defense" during the aftermath. CBS apologised to viewers. Rather believes the documents are real and the story is true. He intends to prove this in court.

TOP RIGHT: AP

On a rooftop overlooking New York's Times Square

back up.' Move forward. Think about the future. This is the way I talk to myself: listen, you can spend your time thinking about what's happened, what might have been, but look ahead, think about tomorrow. It's never been in my nature to get really down. I'm not the kind of person who gets depressed about things."

When asked if he thinks there were people out to get him, he hesitates; then he explains. He doesn't want to name anyone specific. Then he says: "Yes, of course. Certainly over the years, there are people who felt strongly I shouldn't be on the air." There were people he thought he could depend on who didn't come through for him, and the disappointment lingers. "There were some people who I thought had my back and didn't. And people I never heard of said, 'Listen, I'm right here with you.'"

It is a fact of the world we live in that phone calls are not returned when you're not at the top. I tell him I suspect it must be difficult not having the machine of CBS behind him any longer. Does he have to explain himself now to get access? "That's mixed. I just don't have trouble getting telephone calls returned at any level – high, low or whatever. But when it comes to getting access with interviews, people will say, 'I like your work. Tell me why you think my candidate, my CEO or whatever, should do an interview with you.' When you work at a place like CBS you rarely have to explain why. It's just a given." But he says he doesn't find it frustrating at all: it's a challenge. After so many years, to have to sell himself and his assurance of quality must be humbling. But he tells me he sees it as a positive, because having to fight for that access keeps him in the game; it has energised him.

Of course, it takes getting used to. When he joined HDNet, he found himself walking down Madison Avenue looking for temporary office space. He needed an office. He would walk into a building and say: "Hello, I'm Dan Rather and I need temporary office space." It was as familiar to him as walking on the moon. "When you're with a big organisation," he says, "you say to your assistant, 'I need office space,' and it appears."

A few hours have passed. Just as the tape recorder is turned off, he appears to loosen up. I ask if he has ever watched YouTube and he says no. "Is there a lot of stuff on there about me?" he asks. Yes, I say. He looks wary. "Good or bad?" Both. There is a video – he is about to broadcast on location, and the time code shows that for a considerable amount of time he is discussing whether the collar on his trench coat should be turned up or down. "I heard about that video," he says taciturnly. "Someone leaked that footage." Having not seen it, he can't comment – but if he is bothered about it, it doesn't show.

Now that he is more relaxed, we revisit the subject of Palin, and when I mention her beauty-queen past he says it takes confidence to get up in front of an audience in a bathing suit. He doesn't say it in a condemning way, but the implication is: what kind of person does that?

If you're Dan Rather, reputation is everything. You've earned it. Losing this is more devastating than losing your job. You don't want an office with no assignments. You can't take the gold watch and shuffle off gratefully. You refuse to be marginalised. And most of all, you refuse to take the fall for a story that you believe is accurate, a report that ended your 44-year career at CBS News in a hurricane of humiliation.

Suddenly he looks at his watch. He stands up and takes his jacket off the hanger. Sliding one arm into the silk-lined sleeve, he pauses. "If you don't mind me asking, what's the story here?" I tell him: "You. You're the story." ■

For more features by Ariel Leve from The Sunday Times Magazine, go to

'Her memory hasn't allowed her to edit her life, bury pain or discard the trivial'

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