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Commentary > Opinion
from the September 14, 2004 edition

Campaign panic in perfect Times Roman

By Michael Caputo

MIAMI, FL. — If I hear one more Vietnam war story out of either presidential campaign I might just sit out this election. But the documents "60 Minutes" recently revealed as proof of President Bush's dereliction of military duty made me want to send my old Army sergeant out to Dan Rather's office. He had a way to deal with misguided trainees - he'd whack us with his "Ugly Stick."

After high school I enlisted in the US Army, the only clear alternative for a teen without college plans in the late 1970s. I had two options: a rifleman posting or an administrative position. As a Grateful Dead democrat, I chose typewriter keys as my weapon. After basic training, I was sent to clerk school at Fort Jackson, S.C. There, in concert with thousands of push-ups and hundreds of grueling force-marched miles, I learned how to type in 1980.

And nearly a decade after the dubious "60 Minutes" documents were allegedly created, military-issue typewriters were still unable to produce such memoranda.

The clerk's Bible at Jackson typist training was Army Regulation 340-15, "Preparation and Management of Military Correspondence." Our Moses: Staff Sgt. Phillips, a tall, balding Vietnam veteran whose starched fatigues belied his smoke-stained teeth and eye-burning breath. He was quick with quips in his thick Southern drawl and just as fast to anger. Speed was our only goal as we tapped out "the quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog" on our Olivetti manuals. Too slow? Do it again. Errors were acceptable, but only a few. And no backspacing or correction fluid was allowed; that was considered cheating and we always got caught.

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If a trainee stepped out of line, he got the Ugly Stick. Sarge brandished the remnants of a golf club with its head broken off in what was surely a fit of rage at the nearby Ft. Jackson Country Club. He spun it, Chaplin-esque, as he wandered the classroom rows of sweating trainees.

Normally, Phillips would bring the club shaft down on an errant GI's desk with a crack that stopped all typing. Sometimes, he might clip you with the sharp end.

More important, we had to quote AR340-15, chapter and verse. Don't remember the salutation for a Congressman? You get the Ugly Stick. Can't recall the margins on an official memorandum? Ugly Stick. Get a signature block wrong? Duck, and fast.

After training, I was shipped off to the 25th Infantry Division in Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. At the division public affairs office, I suffered one recurring error: In the final signature block, after carefully typing through paragraphs and pages, I couldn't seem to add the "TH" after the "25" without fouling up the entire document. When my new sergeant caught the first such error, he made me fetch AR340-15 and recite the relevant guideline aloud. By the time my enlistment was up, that page in the manual was dog-eared and brown with fingerprints.

I have one clear memory of my Army enlistment in the early 1980s. We clerks cursed every day that our well-supplied, active duty infantry division headquarters had no word processors and not enough electric typewriters. Those electric typewriters we had did not shrink and raise the TH to a superscript like one "60 Minutes" memo allegedly typed to file in 1973 by Bush's National Guard squadron commander, Lt. Col. Jerry Killian.

Our apostrophes weren't curlicues like in the CBS memo where Killian supposedly wrote about pressure on him from "upstairs" to "sugarcoat" Bush's performance report. Military documents of that era had erratic character spacing; every hunt-and-peck letter was a dash different shade of black ink.

But not in these "blockbuster" documents impugning the president - they were perfectly uniform Times Roman word processing.

Mr. Rather's documents are too perfect, too much like Microsoft Word. In fact, the closer you look the more this looks like a con. The authenticity was incredibly easy to check, but the perpetrators of the possible forgery and the legendary newsman were too eager to tarnish the president.

They missed the obvious. But they also missed a vital rule in campaign politics that I learned as a marginal communications staffer in the 1992 Bush/Quayle reelection campaign. The imperative: don't panic.

In the last days of that doomed 1992 Bush reelection effort, we knew we were losing. James Baker and other close Bush friends and family moved in to keep a close eye on all our work. In particular, they were looking for mistakes that would embarrass the family. At the time, dubious documents about the Arkansas governor's alleged "zipper problem" were floating temptingly around campaign headquarters. Wrong-headed whispers among junior staff about "saving the campaign" could be heard if you listened closely.

Finally, we were called into a meeting and given a simple

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instruction: Anyone caught trafficking in this information would be summarily fired. The Bush family did not want to "win this way." Because we were almost sure to lose anyway, they made a further promise that violators would never work in Washington again. Any doubts were laid to rest when we were told who sent this message: the president's son, George W. Bush.

It was an important campaign lesson: Don't act in haste and anger. Always check and recheck all information, especially when your candidate is dreadfully stalled. Only smart politics and hard work can recover a campaign in disarray.

Somehow, John Kerry's allies forgot this rule. So did Dan Rather. He, especially, gets the Ugly Stick.

• *Michael R. Caputo, a Miami-based writer, was a 1992 reelection aide to President George Bush and served in the US Army's 25th Infantry Division from 1980 to 1983.*

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