

# Movie Review: 'Truth'

by Anna Dembowski

The political docudrama "Truth" shares the story behind CBS' "60 Minutes" 2004 broadcast questioning the military service of President George W. Bush who was then seeking re-election.

In the film, documents seem to show that President Bush received preferential treatment while serving in the Texas Air National Guard in the 1970s, perhaps even going AWOL from the military. And so, Mary Mapes (Cate Blanchett), producer of "60 Minutes," suggests CBS air a story two months before the 2004 presidential election regarding the president's supposed absence from the military.

Though the film received largely a negative response upon its October 2015 release by members of the media, particularly those currently representing CBS News, "Truth" is an exemplary work. The acting and dialogue is powerful, and the film doesn't lack suspense.

But since "Truth" is based on actual events and Mapes' memoir "Truth and Duty: The Press, the President, and the Privilege of Power," viewers of "Truth" may already know the ending. The CBS broadcast in question has been called a "scandal." A simple Google search for then-CBS evening news anchor Dan Rather returns pages of results about Rather's "big lie," his exit from the evening news, and the "Killian documents controversy."

It seems contradictory, then, that a film about a controversial broadcast – with little to no good outcome – is titled "Truth," but truth is – or is supposed to be – what every journalist seeks.

The film is bookended by a panel of legal professionals, in which the "60 Minutes" team, most notably Mapes, faces questioning about the accuracy of the Sept. 4, 2004, primetime broadcast.

The "60 Minutes" team builds its story upon documents delivered by Lt. Colonel Bill Burkett (Stacy Keach), a man of few words, who is believed to have received the documents from an undisclosed source.

In order to have the story broadcast

with ample time before the election, the team must race against time and wrestle with confidential sources, curt responses and decades-old documents. Sources are called and then called again. On-camera interviews feel the heat, and even document provider Burkett is pushed to talk on the record, seemingly leaving no stone unturned.

As sources confirm what the documents show, the film's suspense grows. Surely these documents are accurate if military officers are confirming their contents. Surely a document-based story is a legitimate one, as documents inherently don't lie.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of "Truth" is its ability to put its viewers in the shoes of the "60 Minutes" team. You may find yourself asking ethical questions – particularly in light of today's seemingly sensationalized media – about what is right, at what point truth is discovered, and in what way a story can be told without bias. Without knowing the consequences of the special "60 Minutes" broadcast, what makes the story worthy of being told?

But though the film largely tells the story of journalists and controversy, "Truth" is neither devoid of humor nor of heart.

Mike Smith (Topher Grace), who Mapes recruits to join her team, is largely to credit for the humor in the film. With somewhat of an inexperienced and honest, yet nerdy, air, Smith's thoughtful moments are said in few words, but they touch the heart, particularly when Smith credits Dan Rather (Robert Redford) with inspiring him to pursue journalism.

Mapes' character adds intensity and passion for her craft, which increases as deadline nears and multiplies when she faces questioning for the accuracy of her team's story. She states she's seeking the truth, that she's just asking questions as journalists do. But as she faces pressure from other media and turns from predator to prey, her passion turns to anger, annoyance and regret.

"They do not get to do this," she cries. "They do not get to smack us just for asking the questions."

When the facts of her story are bent and skewed by other media, Mapes becomes



photo from Sony Pictures Classics

wearily in displaying the truth.

"I never should have asked the question," she laments to her husband.

For all the good and passion that Mapes embodies as a producer, at times, Mapes seems to let the desire for a powerful, election-changing story get the best of her. Her face – not just her name – will be tied to the story, whatever the outcome, as is true for Rather.

Some may, and have argued, that Mapes brought her politics into her reporting. Some may argue she put her own interests above those of Rather and the rest of CBS. Some may argue she simply wanted to start a discussion – one that encouraged the public to look more deeply into the character of those they elect to be in positions of authority. Mapes exhibits each of these scenarios at different times throughout the film.

Her character is complex – she's neither a reporter without a heart nor a reporter driven by money. While legal officials demand answers to fonts and forgeries and typewriters, Mapes wonders why her seeking of truth seems not to matter at all.

"Truth" is a must-see film for all those interested in politics, the media or just good acting. You'll probably walk away wondering if you would have done anything different than that which the "60 Minutes" team did. You might be angry, you might be empathetic, or you might just be skeptical. Regardless, you'll have enjoyed a good film.

The film, directed by James Vanderbilt, is R-rated primarily for the language used by the newsroom staff and sources. However, there's little, if any questionable content, in addition to the language that makes it have such a rating.

"Truth" will be released on DVD and Blu-Ray Feb. 2. It's also available in the iTunes store.

After you watch "Truth," look for "Spotlight," a Fall 2015 release and Oscar-nominated film about a Catholic church scandal broken by The Boston Globe staff, expected on DVD and Blu-Ray Feb. 23.

Anna Dembowski is a senior journalism major and editor-in-chief for Cedars. She is learning to love coffee, spontaneity and Twitter. Follow her at @annabowskers.