

Boston.com / News / Politics / Presidential candidates / George W. Bush / Big lies for Bush

The Boston Globe

GLOBE EDITORIAL

August 22, 2004

IMAGINE IF supporters of Bill Clinton had tried in 1996 to besmirch the military record of his opponent, Bob Dole. After all, Dole was given a Purple Heart for a leg scratch probably caused, according to one biographer, when a hand grenade thrown by one of his own men bounced off a tree. And while the serious injuries Dole sustained later surely came from German fire, did the episode demonstrate heroism on Dole's part or a reckless move that ended up killing his radioman and endangering the sergeant who dragged Dole off the field?

ADVERTISEMENT

The truth, according to many accounts, is that Dole fought with exceptional bravery and deserves the nation's gratitude. No one in 1996 questioned that record. Any such attack on behalf of Clinton, an admitted Vietnam draft dodger, would have been preposterous.

Yet amazingly, something quite similar is happening today as supporters of President Bush attack the Vietnam record of Senator John Kerry.

The situations are not completely parallel. Bush was not a draft dodger, but he certainly was a Vietnam avoider, having joined the Texas Air National Guard rather than serving in the regular military.

Kerry, on the other hand, may have done more than Dole to qualify as a genuine war hero. Although his tour in Vietnam was short, on at least two occasions he acted decisively and with great daring in combat, saving at least one man's life and earning both a Silver Star and a Bronze Star. That's not our account or Kerry's; it is drawn from eyewitnesses and the military citations themselves.

Yet a group of Vietnam veterans is questioning Kerry's record, operating cynically and ignoring the evidence. Many in this group felt betrayed by Kerry's opposition to the Vietnam War after he returned home. A renewed debate on that war might be useful, though we believe most Americans now agree with Kerry's famous statement to Congress at the time that it was a mistake.

Rather than seeking debate, however, this group, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, is attempting political assassination, claiming in ads and a best-selling book that Kerry is "Unfit for Command." In many cases the charges conflict with statements the same men made in the past. Sometimes the allegations contradict documentary evidence. Last week a former swift boat commander, Larry Thurlow, said Kerry didn't deserve his Bronze Star because there was no enemy fire at the time, but this is contradicted by five separate accounts -- including the Bronze Star citation Thurlow himself was awarded in the same incident, as reported by The Washington Post.

While a few details and dates of Kerry's Vietnam record are open to question, most of the accusations are laughable. Kerry's record of service in Vietnam is clear and, one would think, unassailable. Given the contrast in their Vietnam-era records -- Bush even let his pilot's license lapse while still in the Guard -- Bush might be expected to change the subject.

Yet the Kerry opponents, working with funders and political operatives closely linked to Bush personally, are attempting what is known in politics as the big lie -- an effort simply to contradict the truth repeatedly.

Both parties do it, but Republicans are developing a shocking expertise. The smearing of John McCain in South Carolina in 2000, the reprehensible attack to oust Senator Max Cleland of Georgia in 2002, and this utterly cynical campaign against Kerry by Bush's False Squad deserve only condemnation.

Kerry has faulted a few of his own supporters who lampooned Bush's National Guard record. Now Bush should call off his dogs. ■

