

Stung!

A swarm of new media stories on young George W. Bush's dereliction of duty pops his heroic-leadership bubble.

By Eric Boehlert

On Feb. 13, as controversy swirled around President Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, the White House released more than 400 pages of documents on the press corps, proving, it claimed, that Bush had served honorably and fulfilled his commitment. The sudden rush of records, often redundant, jumbled and out of chronological order, generally left reporters baffled. From Bush's point of view, the document dump was a political success, as the controversy cooled and the paper trail ran dry.

In retrospect, it's doubtful that even White House aides understood all the information embedded in the records, specifically the payroll documents. It's also unlikely they realized how damaging the information could be when read in the proper context. Seven months later, the document dump is coming back to haunt the White House, thanks to researcher Paul Lukasiak, who has spent that time closely examining the paperwork, and more important, analyzing U.S. statutory law, Department of Defense regulations, and Air Force policies and procedures of the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, Lukasiak arrived at the overwhelming conclusion that not only did Bush walk away from his final two years of military obligation, coming dangerously close to desertion, but he attempted to cover up his absenteeism through swindle and fraud.

Lukasiak's findings, detailed on his Web site the AWOL Project, have since been bolstered and augmented by independent research by the Boston Globe and the Associated Press. On Wednesday, CBS News reported what may be among the most damaging details yet: that Bush's squadron commander, the late Col. Jerry Killian, complained he was being pressured by higher-ups to give Bush a favorable evaluation after he suspended him from flying for failure to take his annual physical exam. Titled "CYA," Killian's memo concluded, "I'm having trouble running interference and doing my job."

But for the last several months, Lukasiak has practically had the AWOL story to himself, as the mainstream media mostly seemed silenced by the big February document release, the daunting task of decoding military personnel records, and the repeated refrain from the Bush White House that the president was honorably discharged. Among the three most compelling conclusions reached by Lukasiak in his new, meticulous research, are:

- Bush's request to transfer to an Alabama Guard unit in 1972, in order to work on the Senate campaign of a family friend, Lukasiak found, was not designed to be temporary, but rather was Bush's attempt to sever ties completely with the Texas Air National Guard and find a new, permanent unit in Alabama for which he was ineligible, where he wouldn't have to do any training during his final two years. His superiors in Texas essentially covered for Bush's getaway. However, the Air Reserve Personnel Center (ARPC) in Denver, Colo., which had final say, uncovered the attempted scam, put an end to it, and admonished Bush's superiors for endorsing Bush's bogus request. (The CBS News report shows that the locals were chafing at interference from "higher-ups" presumably connected to the powerful Bush family.) In the interim, Bush simply ignored his weekend duties for nearly six straight months, not bothering to show up at military units in either Alabama or Texas.
- The White House has conceded that Bush missed some required weekend training drills, but insists Bush promptly made up those drills and earned enough annual

credits for an honorable discharge. In fact, according to Lukasiak's research, based on the procedures in place at the time requiring that makeup dates be completed within 15 days before or 30 days after the date of the drill missed, between half and two-thirds of the points credited to Bush for substitute training were fraudulent. Some of the points credited to Bush were "earned" nine weeks beyond the date of the missed drill. According to Air Force policy, Bush could not have received permission for substitute training that far outside the accepted parameters. The evidence is also overwhelming that Bush failed to get authorization for substitute training in advance, suggesting the points were awarded by the Texas Air National Guard retroactively and without any supporting paperwork. The fraudulent points are key, because without them Bush would have fallen far short of meeting his annual obligation, which meant he should have been transferred to active duty for 24 months and made eligible for service in Vietnam.

- On Oct. 1, 1973, Bush received an honorable discharge from the Texas Air National Guard in order to move to Boston and attend Harvard Business School, where he was still obligated to find a unit in Massachusetts to fulfill his remaining nine months of duty, or face being placed on active duty. Once again, Bush made no such effort. But the Air Force in Denver, acting retroactively, in effect overturned Bush's honorable discharge and placed him on "Inactive Status" effective Sept. 15, 1973. When Bush left Texas, his personnel file was sent to Denver for review. The ARPC quickly realized Bush had failed to take a required physical exam, his Texas superior could not account for his whereabouts covering nearly a 12-month period, and because of absenteeism Bush had failed to "satisfactorily participate" as a member of the Texas Air National Guard. Bush's "Inactive Status" meant his relationship with the Air Force (and the Guard) was severed and he was therefore eligible for the draft.

Soon afterward, large gaps began appearing in Bush's paper trail. Lukasiak concludes that only last-minute intervention, likely from Bush's local Houston draft board, saved him from active duty, as well as finally securing his honorable discharge, removing his "Inactive Status." Ironically, that means strings were pulled to get Bush out of the Guard in 1973, just as they were pulled to get him enrolled in 1968.

The AWOL Project's conclusions are bound to give Dan Bartlett concern. The White House director of communications has served as Bush's point person over the last five years regarding inquiries about National Guard service. Dating back to the 2000 campaign and right up to this day, Bartlett has routinely changed his stories regarding Bush's service depending on what information was available to the public. As more and more documents trickle out and it becomes increasingly obvious Bush received wildly favorable treatment during his Guard days while doing his best to skirt his duties, Bartlett is left trying to stake out explanations that haven't already been discredited. And those options are shrinking.

Bartlett's latest flip-flop surrounds Bush's failure to locate a new Guard unit and fulfill his duty while attending Harvard Business School. In 1999, Bartlett said Bush had reported for duty at a Massachusetts Guard unit as required. This week Bartlett conceded to the Boston Globe he must have "misspoke," because it's clear Bush made no effort whatsoever to serve out his term while living in Boston. That answer is reminiscent of Bartlett's response during the 2000 campaign when asked about Bush's failure to take a required military physical in 1972: "As he was not flying, there was no reason for him to take a flight physical exam." But that response is directly contradicted by the Air Force Specialty Code, which required a physical regardless of flight status.

On Wednesday, Bartlett told CBS News, in response to Jerry Killian's memos, "It's impossible to read the mind of a dead man." He then reverted to his usual refrain: "The

official files tell the facts,” Bartlett said. “And the facts are President Bush served. He served honorably. And that’s why he was honorably discharged.”

The shifting explanations and obfuscations coming from the White House are one reason why the Guard story remains dangerous for Bush. The controversy, after all, is not merely about how he received a million dollars’ worth of free pilot training and then stiffed the government when it came time to pay it back in service. It’s also about how, for the last decade, Bush and his advisors have done everything possible to distort, if not erase, the truth about Bush’s service record in order to advance his political career.

The detailed research from Lukasiak, a Philadelphia caterer, deals strictly with the contents of Bush’s military service documents, particularly those after April 1972, when Bush decided—on his own—to stop flying. But what’s fascinating is that when recent news reports from Salon, the Associated Press, CBS and the Boston Globe are layered on top of the AWOL Project research, they fit together almost seamlessly, revealing a vivid portrait of Bush as a young man who evaded his military service.

- Last week Salon reported that in late 1972 George H.W. Bush phoned a longtime Bush family confidant in Alabama, Jimmy Allison, to ask if there was room on the local campaign he was managing for Bush’s troublesome son George, or “Georgie” as he was called. “The impression I had was that Georgie was raising a lot of hell in Houston, getting in trouble and embarrassing the family, and they just really wanted to get him out of Houston and under Jimmy’s wing,” Linda Allison, his widow, told Salon. “After about a month I asked Jimmy what was Georgie’s job, because I couldn’t figure it out. I never saw him do anything,” said Allison. Asked if she’d ever seen Bush in a uniform, Allison said: “Good lord, no. I had no idea that the National Guard was involved in his life in any way.”
- This week a new advocacy group calling itself Texans for Truth announced that it will air a television commercial featuring a former Alabama National Guard pilot who insists he never saw Bush in 1972 at the small Guard unit at Dannelly Air National Guard base in Montgomery, where the president claims he served. The pilot, Bob Mintz, has told a consistent tale. In February, he told the Memphis Flyer newspaper: “There’s no way we wouldn’t have noticed a strange rooster in the henhouse, especially since we were looking for him.” Mintz was referring to the news on the base that somebody from Texas with political influence was coming to train with the unit. “I was *looking* for him,” Mintz said.
- On Wednesday night, on CBS’s “60 Minutes,” in an interview with Dan Rather, former Texas Lt. Gov. Ben Barnes went public for the first time about how he pulled strings to get the young Bush a coveted slot, at the height of the Vietnam War, in the Texas Air National Guard. “I’ve thought about it an awful lot and you walk through the Vietnam memorial, particularly at night like I did a few months ago and, I tell you, . . . reflecting back, I’m very sorry about it, but you know, it happened and it was because of my ambition, my youth and my lack of understanding. But it happened and it’s not . . . something I’m necessarily proud of.”

CBS also reported on four documents from the personal files of Col. Jerry Killian, Bush’s squadron commander. One memo ordered Bush to take “an annual physical examination”—an order he refused. CBS reports: “On August 1, 1972, Col. Killian grounded Lt. Bush for failure to perform to U.S. Air Force/Texas Air National Guard standards and for failure to take his annual physical as ordered. A year after Lt. Bush’s suspension from flying, Killian was asked to write another assessment. Killian’s memo, titled ‘CYA,’ reads he is being pressured by higher-ups to give the young pilot a favorable yearly evaluation; to, in effect, sugarcoat his review. He refuses, saying, ‘I’m having trouble running interference and doing my job.’”

- This week, the A.P. reported that a thorough analysis of Bush's military documents indicates obvious gaps in his service along with equally gratuitous gaps in his paperwork. Specifically missing are: "A report from the Texas Air National Guard to Bush's local draft board certifying that Bush remained in good standing." "Records of a required investigation into why Bush lost flight status." "A written acknowledgment from Bush that he had received the orders grounding him." "Reports of formal counseling sessions Bush was required to have after missing more than three training sessions." "A signed statement from Bush acknowledging he could be called to active duty if he did not promptly transfer to another guard unit after leaving Texas."
- In February of this year, Salon interviewed Bill Burkett, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Texas National Guard, who claims he observed aides to Bush going through his military file in 1997 to remove any embarrassing information, tossing documents in the trash, allegedly the types of documents that might help answer many of the unanswered questions surrounding Bush's Guard service. "Activities occurred in order to, in my opinion, inappropriately build a false image of the governor's military service," Burkett told Salon. Burkett first went public with his accusations in 1998 and has told the same story consistently for six years.
- Also last February, Salon reported that Bush's mysterious decision in the spring of 1972 to stop flying and subsequently refuse to take a physical exam came at the same time the Air Force announced its Medical Service Drug Abuse Testing Program, which meant random drug testing for pilots, including Guardsmen.

Meanwhile, the White House has not been able to produce anything or anybody with any credibility to contradict the growing body of evidence that suggests Bush deliberately walked away from his duties and that Bush and his handlers continue to lie about his military service. Retired Lt. Col. John Calhoun was the one witness who was brought forward this year to back up Bush's story that he actually showed up in Alabama. He recalled seeing Bush at training sessions between "eight to ten times from May to October 1972." Yet not even Bush's own payroll records suggest he did drills in Alabama at the time Calhoun allegedly spotted him. (Amazingly, ABC News on Wednesday used Calhoun as a credible witness to bolster Bush's account, despite the fact that the dates Calhoun cites don't even match up with Bush's.)

There's also no paper trail to support Bush's claim that he completed any service after 1972. As Lukasiak notes, each substitute training Bush completed, and there were many, should have generated authorized AF Form 40a's: "All told, Bush performed 'substitute training' on at least 20 days. Thus there should be, at the very least, 20 AF Form 40a's with the name of the officer who authorized the training in advance, the name and signature of the officer who supervised the training, and Bush's own signature." But not one such form exists.

A similar absence of information surrounds Bush's dubious explanation of his attempted transfer to Alabama. The move should have generated a small mountain of paperwork. Under normal circumstances, 10 steps are required to transfer:

1. The Guardsman announces that he will need to relocate.
2. His personnel officer explains the relocation policies and procedures to him.
3. The Guardsman signs an acknowledgment that he has received the relocation counseling.
4. The personnel officer gives the Guardsman a certification of satisfactory participation, which he will need to get approval for a transfer.

5. The Guardsman locates an appropriate Ready Reserve position with a new unit, and submits a "Transfer Request Form" (Form 1288) and a new "Ready Reserve Service Agreement (Form 1644), along with the certification of satisfactory participation, to the "receiving unit."
6. The receiving unit "indorses" the request on the back of the Form 1288, and provides the Guardsman with certification that an appropriate position is available in that unit.
7. The Guardsman gives Form 1288, Form 1644, the certification of an appropriate position, and a letter of resignation to his current unit commander.
8. The unit commander indorses the request, and forwards it to the state adjutant general.
9. The adjutant general approves the request, and discharges the Guardsman from the Air National Guard to the Air Force Reserves.
10. The Air Force Reserves assigns the former Guardsman to his new unit.

Bush's case, according to Lukasiak's research, "There is no statement of counseling, no certification of satisfactory performance, no certification of a suitable vacancy, no letter of resignation, no discharge papers, no discharge orders, and no reassignment orders."

There are also indications that Bush—unwilling to fly, take a physical or report for duty—was trying to mislead Guard officials with his transfer application. When asked for his permanent address, Bush listed the p.o. box for the Alabama campaign headquarters he worked for temporarily. When asked to note his Air Force Specialty Code, Bush wrote down 1125B, the designation for F-89 or F-94 pilots. At the time of his transfer request, both of these planes had been retired from service in all components of the Air Force, including the Guard and Reserves. Bush's accurate code was 1125D, designing an F-102 pilot. At the time, F-102 planes were still very much in use. It was an error Bush made more than once on the application. Lukasiak writes: "The odds of Bush being able to scam his way into a non-training unit [in Alabama] would be enhanced if his specific skill set was one which was no longer useful to the Air Force."

In May 1972, Bush was informed that the unit in Alabama he requested was clearly unsuitable for a pilot of his stature, yet he pressed on, and his Texas superiors endorsed the transfer request and submitted it. But the Denver headquarters caught the scam and rejected it. The Texas chief of military personnel sent a curt warning to Bush's unit about the clearly bogus request: "Attention is invited to basic communication."

Lukasiak's work has created a storm in the blogosphere. (He's also a Salon Table Talk member, and an active thread is devoted to his research.) He makes no secret of his conviction that Bush used his family connections to evade the draft. The AWOL Project concludes: "Bush simply blew off his last two years of required service, and was able to get away with it because he came from a politically influential family. There is no other explanation for Bush's records. None."

Of course none of that stopped Bush from hyping his military service as he launched his political career. In 1978, during an unsuccessful run for Congress in west Texas, Bush produced campaign literature that claimed he had served "in the US Air Force and the Texas Air National Guard." In 1999, when asked by an A.P. reporter why Bush had claimed to have served specifically with the U.S. Air Force when he'd only been in the National Guard, Bush spokeswoman Karen Hughes insisted the claim was accurate because when Bush attended flight school for the Air National Guard he was considered to be on active duty for the Air Force. That was plainly false, as the A.P. noted, citing Air Force policy, which stated Guardsmen are never considered to be members of the Air Force active duty.

Just four years after escaping his military obligations, Bush was already trying to rewrite his military record for political gain. Bush said he strongly supported the Vietnam War, obscuring how he spent several years, after securing a safe spot in the National Guard, evading his military obligation. Now President Bush orders Guardsmen and Reservists to shoulder an unprecedented load—physically, financially and emotionally—in the war in Iraq. As new information at last begins to emerge about what he really did, Bush and his aides are still at work covering up the record. His ultimate war is with the truth about his past.

Eric Boehlert is a senior writer at Salon.