

CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper*

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JAKE TAPPER: We start in our politics lead where a growing debate over how TV networks cover news has upended CBS's *60 Minutes* after 58 seasons on the air. Last night, CBS News fired veteran *60 Minutes* correspondent Scott Kelly, one day after a show staff meeting, Pelley sharply criticized the new magazine's new boss Nick Bilton to his face. According to leaked audio from the meeting, Pelley told Bilton he would "never be welcome here," saying that Bilton and CBS News editor-in-chief Bari Weiss are unqualified for their jobs. Pelley then said Weiss "does not love this place. She was brought in to kill it and she's been doing exactly that." Weiss, other CBS leaders, and HR held a follow-up meeting with Scott Pelley yesterday, but the end result was this, a letter from Bilton notifying Pelley of his termination. Bilton writing that Pelley "hijacked his very first staff meeting" and "demonstrated that you have no interest in contributing to the future success of the show or approaching my new tenure with a mind open to collaboration and progress." In a statement, last night after his firing, Pelley said that Paramount, the new owner of CBS, is trying to curry favor with the Trump administration and claims that new management recently "instructed me to inject falsehoods and bias into a politically sensitive story." Pelley says that he ignored and refused those instructions. We're trying to find out exactly what he's referencing there. In a statement, a CBS News spokesperson said: "There is no political interference at CBS News, not from ownership, not from Bari Weiss. The only interference is the normal back and forth between editor and correspondent that happens in every newsroom." The story did not end there, because in this morning's CBS editorial meeting, Barry Weiss addressed the firing, saying "I'm only interested in working in a newsroom that is built on trust and mutual respect. That foundation was broken on Monday, and despite her attempts to engage with Scott Pelley and to find a way back, unfortunately, we weren't able to do so, and so we had to part ways." After those comments leaked, Pelley then issued another statement to *The New York Times* saying "There was no effort of any kind to 'find a way back' as Weiss said in the editorial meeting, at no point did anyone in the Tuesday meeting suggest that there could be steps taken by either side that would lead to a resolution." A Paramount spokesperson pointed to a *Wall Street Journal* piece outlining the CBS President Tom Cibrowski opened that meeting and said the purpose was to figure out how to go forward. The article reads: "At the beginning of the meeting on Tuesday, Cibrowski told Pelley that he had a long legacy with *60 Minutes* and that they would like to talk to him about, 'how to reach a point of civility and go forth,' according to a person familiar with the matter. Now, let's zoom out for a second to look at the core issues here and why this larger *60 Minutes* overhaul may be happening because this story is relevant when it comes to two significant developments in American media right now. One is one that you are all out there very familiar with. It's the atomization of where people get their information with cord-cutting, social media, and streaming TV, and podcasts, and so many channels, and influencers, and much more, resulting in legacy media losing audiences and seeking ways to reach you where you are, which is often on your phone wanting information when you want it. Second, this is also a story of media consolidation and those who are trying to build big mega-companies in the environment where we have a President who is more than willing to impose his likes and dislikes on the regulatory world. Now, people close to Bari Weiss insists

that the CBS overhaul is about culture, not politics. They think that *60 Minutes* is an archaic institution that is in urgent need of reinvention. Bari Weiss argues that the news media needs to be fairer and needs to regain the public's trust, and her boss, David Ellison, says that CBS News needs to appeal to the 70 percent of the country that is in the political middle. On the other hand, what *60 Minutes* defenders see as its strengths, the Bari Weiss individuals and executives see as potential shortcomings, and they're determined to rebuild this news magazine for a digital world in a vertical video age. But Scott Pelley and others at CBS, and others who used to be at CBS do think there's something more, something political behind this rebuild. They say that Paramount's new owners, with David Ellison at the top, are seeking a closer relationship with Donald Trump and his administration and that Ellison appointed Weiss to appease Trump and overhaul *60 Minutes*, which Trump doesn't like, and all of CBS News, which Trump doesn't like. And this argument goes that all of this is happening in order to get approval of the purchase of Paramount last year by David Ellison's company and the pending purchase of Warner Bros Discovery any day now. And of course, we should note Warner Bros Discovery owns CNN. If you want to know one of the reasons why people keep suggesting that new ownership of these news organizations is behind wanting to curry favor with Trump, and that's one of the things driving all this, it's because of things that President Trump keeps saying, or Secretary Hegseth. Just a few moments ago, President Trump said this to CNN's Kaitlin Collins:

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: But CNN in particular — CNN does such false reporting, but now they have new ownership, so maybe it'll straighten it out. I doubt it, but it's hard to straighten garbage out.

TAPPER: A reminder that President Trump calls any reporting he doesn't like false — false, and any reporting he doesn't like garbage. Again, CBS News and Paramount reject the assertion of any political influence or interference. Here to discuss, our first panel is former CBS News Justice correspondent Scott McFarlane and Terry Moran, former ABC News chief White House correspondent. Scott, let me start with you. You worked with Scott Pelley. You worked at CBS News. Are you surprised by how some of this went down? What do you think is going on here?

SCOTT MACFARLANE: Nobody wins if *60 Minutes* is damaged through this. Nobody wins. It's still one of those rare media entities, Jake, that can cut through the noise and cut through the clutter. Scott Pelley was, I think, the living Mount Rushmore at CBS News when we worked together. I mean, I wasn't called Scott in the office. I was called Scotty Mac, McFarland, or, hey, you, come over here because Scott Pelley was Scott. That's the reverence with which he was held at CBS News. I'm surprised that anybody would get rid of a transcendent personality who can attract an audience or who is associated with the strength of a brand. You watch Scott Pelley on *60 Minutes*. You knew you were going to get a comprehensive report. You never want to damage a brand by getting rid of the pillar of the entity. But there's some good news for the show and for CBS. The new product, whatever it looks like, whatever it sounds like in September, will be sampled. It still comes on after NFL football. It still has tens of millions of people who will if nothing else trip into watching the show because it comes on after Patrick Mahomes. They have a big responsibility to make sure it does not become the New Coke or the Crystal Pepsi of *60 Minutes*.

TAPPER: So Terry, just a reminder of viewers after an illustrious career at ABC News, where you and I worked together some time ago. ABC News fired you because you went on Twitter and you wrote that Trump advisors Stephen Miller “eats his hate” as “his spiritual nourishment.” You said that both he and Trump are “world class haters.” The White House demanded your head, and ABC News provided it. What do you think is going on at CBS News? Do you think it’s related at all to what you went through at ABC News?

TERRY MORAN: Different stories, right? I’ve always felt like a — that company has its policies. They said I — I violated them. I thought I had said something was accurate, fair, and true. This is different, and there’s two basic principles. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, okay? Yes, *60 Minutes* ratings are down to the last 10 years because of the splintering of the audience, is it?

TAPPER: Everyone’s ratings are down.

MORAN: Yes, there is no journalism enterprise in the Western Hemisphere that has the cultural impact, the political impact, the stature that *60 Minutes* does. So, the notion that they’re trying to fix it, either they’re messing it up or something else is going on, and the straightest line, the shortest distance between two points is straight line. I mean, last year Bill Owens, a long time executive producer of *60 Minutes*, resigned, saying that management was trying to interfere with political content. Anderson Cooper left quietly to be with his family, which is what you say when you don’t want to say what you want to say. They fired Cecilia Vega and Sharon Alfonso, two fearless, bold journalists, troublemakers. I mean, in a good way, good trouble, right, as John Lewis used to say. And now, here’s Scott Pelley saying, political influence has done this. There’s one reason this is happening, which is that the management at CBS wants to curry favor with Trump because the new owner of CBS wants his business interest to come out correctly by his lights under the Trump administration.

TAPPER: So, Scott obviously, Bari Weiss and David Ellison would reject that premise and they would argue that CBS News and also *60 Minutes* have an anti-Trump spin, liberal spin, not fair, and that the media has been so unfair that we are so untrusted by the American people, and polls do suggest that the media trust is at an all-time low. What would you say to that? Do you see that argument?

MACFARLANE: I would venture the bold prediction that, if Americans were surveyed about the trustworthiness of *60 Minutes*, it may have more support and more trust, more credibility with Americans than the general milquetoast term “media.” What is the media at this point that they’re being polled on? Are they talking about specific programs, specific sources of information? Are they talking about the garbage on the internet, the garbage on talk radio? Are they talking about the actual verified, bonafide source sources of journalism? The ones who actually have credibility and empirical evidence to back up their reporting. This all feels to me like apples and oranges.

TAPPER: So, I don’t cover news media a lot on the show. I don’t — I think it’s — I generally think it’s naval gazing. I generally think that we have so much to cover. But this story felt different. It felt a little different with Sharyn and Cecilia and the executive producer last week.

And then this — this very public kerfuffle with Scott Pelley. This is bigger than just this show and just this channel, don't you think?

MORAN: Yeah, it's a fire bell in the night, right? We were at ABC News together, and —

TAPPER: It was very different back then.

MORAN: — it was very different back then, but it was in a corporate, and it was in a big corporation, and there was supposed to be a wall between the owners on one side who did owning, and the journalists on the other side who did journalism, and that wall got shipped from time to time. At CBS, that wall is gone. And the question in this era is, can any of those walls at any legacy, corporate-owned news media organizations stand under the kind of pressure that's being put? I would also just add one more thing. I think chasing MAGA audiences are a fool's errand because they don't want the kind of journalism that *60 Minutes* does, which is in depth and straight and fearless. They want the journalism that flatters their own prejudices.

TAPPER: Alright, Terry Moran and Scott MacFarlane, thanks to both of you. Let's go now to CNN chief media analyst Brian Stelter. So, Brian, CBS News declined to offer us a guest. So, I'm actually going to rely on you to try to help us understand how they view events. How do they view what has happened in the last day or two?

BRIAN STELTER: Right. Certainly, these have been some self-inflicted wounds at CBS News, and this is not the first one. The overhaul of the *Evening News* was also highly controversial and picked apart months ago. And the ratings have not really improved due to all those changes. You know, my sources close to CBS management say that they believe *60 Minutes* is really valuable, but that it's archaic. It's out of date. It's an institution that needs change. They believe, and this is the management point of view, that some of those staffers are stubborn and sanctimonious. They definitely believe that about Pelley. So, these managers, especially Bari Weiss, they want to inject outside energy and outside ideas, and that's what they've done. But Jake, I would say not just many, but most TV news veterans believe that even if Weiss has the right instincts and is trying to do the right things, she has gone about it the right the wrong way. Maybe the right moves, but the wrong way.

TAPPER: So *60 Minutes*, it's a huge success story. Just in general, whether or not people like the editorial content.

STELTER: Yes, it is.

TAPPER: It averaged 9.1 million viewers in its 58th season, up nine percent from the prior season average. Why would this be a focus right now, when there's obviously so much? Look, everybody in legacy media CNN, MS — and everybody we're all trying to figure out how to revamp and get where people are to get on their phones, to get on their streamers. We're all trying to do that. Why start with *60 Minutes*?

STELTER: Right. The *60 Minutes* ratings were up nine percent this season, but the lead-in for *60*

*Minutes* for most of the season was the NFL, and those NFL ratings were up 11 percent. So, from the Weiss camp, they say, hey, *60 Minutes* needs to evolve now or it will perish, she said to staffers last week. And so did Bilton. If you don't disrupt yourself, you will be disrupted. But again, most of those TV news veterans look around and they say that's just a smokescreen for a political agenda here. And I think people are right to be skeptical. I'm joining you from the mountains of Wyoming. People here all day long are asking me about Scott Pelley. So, you're right, this story is breaking through unlike most media stories, because people see a treasured American institution potentially at risk. And that has been the story of Trump 2.0, not just in media, but in many other fields. People are right to be skeptical, not cynical, but skeptical. News outlets have to earn and re-earn your trust every day. Controversy like this one at CBS, they make it harder to earn trust. And the bosses at CBS right now, they know this is a crisis. They know this is a big, big problem. They now have to rebuild *60 Minutes* with only three of the seven correspondents that were on the show this season, Jake.

TAPPER: Brian Stelter, thank you so much. Appreciate it.