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JFK expert: Rather twisted facts

By Kevin Phinney

A forensic expert claims newsman Dan Rather deliberately distorted his opinion for a "48 Hours" episode dealing with the assassination of President Kennedy.

In a letter to Rather obtained by The Hollywood Reporter, Dr. Cyril Wecht, a Pittsburgh-based forensic pathologist, accuses the CBS anchorman of acting "in a treacherous manner" while conducting interviews for the show.

Rather declined comment, but Catherine Upin, a spokeswoman

for "48 Hours," said, "Dr. Wecht's main gripe is that he wanted more air time, but in the time that he was given in the broadcast, he was edited fairly, his remarks are in context and accurately represent his views."

In interviews subsequent to the letter, Wecht claimed his refutation of a Warren Commission theory was edited out in favor of a tangential quip. An independent expert on the assassination, Wecht has offered testimony to many of

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when he introduced the phrase, Rather expressed surprise because he had not mentioned the theory in his question.

After remarking that the very concept gave him a headache, Wecht added he wanted to use his interview in order to debunk the hypothesis. He explained the reaction was impossible unless the president's spinal cord had been

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damaged, "And no one's scenario puts the president's wounds in that area," he said. Ironically, Wecht's non sequitur was the only quote from the interview used in the broadcast.

"Is this the way an experienced, ethical newsman conducts himself?" Wecht asks in his letter dated March 16. "Are there no self-imposed standards of journalistic decency that somebody in your position should be expected to adhere to?"

In his conclusion, Wecht writes, "You will carry this shame with you to the very end of your professional career. I wonder if occasionally, in a private moment of honest introspection, you ever reflect on this possibility and find yourself the least bit troubled?"

On behalf of Rather, Upin responded, "If his other concern is that we displayed him as a supporter of the neuromuscular theory, any viewing of his comments would certainly negate that," she said. "He's obviously very sarcastic in his characterization of the theory. There's no question about that. This is a topic over which experts disagree and opinions run strong. What Dan has always tried to do is approach it fairly, and you can't go as far as a journalist as you can as an independent person with a theory." □

Rather

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the official governmental investigations of the murder and assisted Life magazine in its publication of frames from the Zapruder film. Wecht wrote his letter to Rather after the "48 Hours" episode aired Feb. 5.

During an hourlong session with Rather covering the spectrum of Kennedy assassination theories, Wecht brought up the concept of the president's "massive neuromuscular reaction."

Once known as "the jet effect," the theory is often used as an explanation of why Kennedy is seen in the Zapruder film recoiling to the left rear from a bullet wound to the head. If Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin and was firing from behind the president, Wecht says, the president's body would have been hurled forward.

Wecht says in the letter that