

KILLING TRUTH

The Lies And Legends Of Bill O'Reilly

By Eric Boehlert and Media Matters for America

Chapter One

Self-Made Man

“Here's the truth: Everything I've said about my reportorial career -- everything -- is true.” Bill O'Reilly, [February 20](#), 2015.

It all started with a tweet.

At 5:28 PM on February 19, 2015, David Corn's [tweet](#) announced “Bill O'Reilly Has His Own Brian Williams Problem.” And with that, *Mother Jones* magazine's examination of O'Reilly wartime reporting exaggerations went off like a media grenade and the Fox News host scrambled to salvage his reputation.

The news arrived in the wake of the Brian Williams scandal at NBC News, in which the revelation that the longtime anchorman had exaggerated his war reporting experience eventually forced him off the air for a six-month suspension. Corn's new exposure of O'Reilly's penchant for stretching the truth about his own journalism glory days immediately had journalism wags shaking their heads in disbelief. Given that O'Reilly had condemned Williams for his fabrication sins, the *Mother Jones* story presented a nearly airtight case of public hypocrisy.

Worse for O'Reilly, Corn's debunking shone a spotlight on O'Reilly's fondness for self-aggrandizement. Soon other, even more astonishing allegations of wrongdoing came tumbling out about O'Reilly's reporting past; revelations that largely left the blustery host speechless, or at least unwilling to wage a public battle to defend his reputation.

The avalanche began when *Mother Jones* [detailed](#) how O'Reilly had “recounted dramatic stories about his own war reporting that don't withstand scrutiny.” O'Reilly suggested he had reported from the Falkland Islands combat zone while reporting for CBS News in 1982; but no CBS reporter had made it to the islands. He had said that “many were killed” in a June 1982 Buenos Aires protest following the Falkland Islands war, and compared reporting from that protest to being in a “war zone.” But news accounts from the time cited injuries and chaos, no deaths.

Media Matters then documented two more jaw-dropping O'Reilly fabrications. Copious evidence was uncovered [contradicting](#) his previous claim about hearing a shotgun blast that killed a key figure in the investigation into President John F. Kennedy's assassination. O'Reilly also [lied](#) about personally witnessing the execution of four American churchwomen while reporting from war-torn El Salvador. (Who lies about murdered nuns?)

And there was more: *The Guardian* [reported](#) that six former O'Reilly colleagues from his time at *Inside Edition* disputed accounts he has told over the years about his allegedly harrowing work covering the Los Angeles riots in 1992, in which he claimed to have been “attacked by protesters” with “bricks and stones.” And as for previous claims that O'Reilly had seen “Irish terrorists kill and maim their fellow citizens” while reporting from war-torn Northern Ireland? [Scratch those](#) from his resume. O'Reilly made it all up.

As the face of Fox News, the most powerful cable news channel in the country, as well as a best-selling author, the controversy brought into focus O'Reilly's unique brand of pathology. He appears to be a man focused on reinventing a version of himself that's more compelling than the real thing. O'Reilly has insisted that while he might be a “[champion bloviator](#)” who sits behind a

desk for a living, he earned that right to pontificate because he put in all the hard work as a fearless reporter who rushed into danger in the name of breaking news. “I bloviate about stuff I’ve seen. They bloviate about stuff that they haven’t,” he once [bragged](#).

Partisan misinformation is one thing. It’s the Fox News hallmark after all, and O’Reilly has trafficked in that, enthusiastically, for decades. But there’s something even more troubling about a broadcaster who not only makes up facts in pursuit of winning a political debate, but who makes up facts about his own life in order to portray himself as tougher, more accomplished, and more credible than he really is.

For a man who [once bragged](#) that he was the second most powerful man in America (behind only the President of the United States), O’Reilly seems desperately concerned with puffing up his resume by reimagining his past. Recall that O’Reilly wasn’t always just a partisan player regurgitating Republican talking points for a living. He had a taste of the network news life, with stints at both CBS News and ABC News back in the 1980s. (He once had dreams of replacing Peter Jennings as ABC’s nightly news anchor.) But they didn’t work out. He was never more than a minor player at both networks, and to this day he seems unable to contain the lingering resentment.

Does that explain O’Reilly’s need to rewrite his reporting past? It’s possible. The lies of O’Reilly also seem closely connected with the persona of class resentment he’s fed off for decades. With a professional chip on his shoulder about the inside elites who have tried to keep him down, and who are now supposedly offended by his professional success, the need to improve O’Reilly’s past becomes paramount to that narrative.

Why didn't he rocket to the top at CBS News? Because entrenched elites there blocked his path to glory even as he covered the Falklands War, the turning point in his aborted CBS career.

Why wasn't O'Reilly honored as the superstar high school and college athlete that he was? Because dark forces were aligned against him and worked hard to keep his true talents hidden. That's the O'Reilly pattern: Self-aggrandizement fueled by narcissism and self-pity, and the deeply flawed view of his own abilities and accomplishments.

Indeed, O'Reilly's lies about his alleged wartime bravery echo the tales he's told as an adult about his youth, and specifically how he was an extraordinarily talented baseball and football player who was denied his true destiny, not because he wasn't good enough to compete with his peers but because powerful influences worked to thwart his rise.

"At age seven he started considering himself a star" of the Levittown Little League, Marvin Kitman wrote in his 2007 O'Reilly biography, *The Man Who Would Not Shut Up*. (O'Reilly cooperated with Kitman for the book.) And by age sixteen, according to O'Reilly, he was throwing 85 MPH fastball; a feat many college pitchers would envy.

Yet despite all that brimming superstar talent, O'Reilly somehow got cut from his local Babe Ruth team. Actually, he got cut by *both* teams, the Levittown Babe Ruth A and B team. Everyone was outraged by the injustice, O'Reilly assured Kitman, and then he explained what really went down: "It was all politics. The reason he didn't make the team, O'Reilly was convinced, was because the team managers had sons who were pitchers, and they didn't want him in the mix. They wanted their kids to be pitchers."

O'Reilly loves to tell a similar tale of woe about his aborted football career and how his high school's football coach wouldn't even let him try out for the team even though he could throw the ball "eighty yards down the field" and kick field goals "sixty yards"; another feat most NFL Hall of Famers would envy.

But O'Reilly had the last laugh, because he became a football standout at college. At least, according to O'Reilly.

In a brief piece he penned for the 2005 Super Bowl program, O'Reilly bragged that he had "won the national punting title for my division as a senior" while at Marist College. But as Keith Olbermann [discovered](#), Marist didn't have a varsity football team until eight years after O'Reilly graduated. Instead they had a club level team, for which there were few if any national statistics kept, making it virtually impossible for O'Reilly to brag about being the best punter in the country and his college "division."

Also, the punting triumph came his senior year? In his O'Reilly biography, Kitman chronicled how O'Reilly was strictly a back-up quarterback on the Marist football team and that he quit the team after his sophomore season. ("His father was deeply upset by young Bill's decision to quit football.") There was no mention in the book, which is filled with O'Reilly boasts, of him leading the nation in punting "as a senior."

That casual willingness to obfuscate soon revealed itself in O'Reilly's professional career. And investigative humorist Al Franken was among the first to raise a red flag, over a decade ago.

In 2001, years before he became a U.S. Senator from Minnesota, and years after he starred on *Saturday Night Live*, Franken was watching an O'Reilly interview on C-Span when the Fox host defended the seriousness of his TV alma mater *Inside Edition* by bragging that the program had won two coveted Peabody Awards

for broadcast journalism. But as Franken confirmed, *Inside Edition* never won any Peabody Awards. The show won a different award, called the George Polk Award.

After Franken passed that information on to *The Washington Post*, which asked O'Reilly about the discrepancy, O'Reilly [admitted](#) his mistake: "So I got mixed up between a Peabody Award and a Polk Award, which is just as prestigious. Is this an illogical mistake? My comment is: We did good work. There was no intention to mislead. I really don't understand what Franken's problem is."

But two weeks later, after a *Newsday* columnist knocked O'Reilly for the Peabody snafu, O'Reilly went on Fox and said he'd *never* claimed *Inside Edition* had won Peabody awards. He insisted the allegation he had done so was "totally fabricated." Yet just twelve days earlier O'Reilly *conceded* to the *Post* that he'd done exactly that. (i.e. "So I got mixed up.") As Franken [noted](#), "That sort of seems pathological to me."

O'Reilly actually [threatened](#) his funnyman tormentor: "One day he's going to get a knock on his door and life as he's known it will change forever. That day will happen, trust me."

O'Reilly then dug the hole deeper when he convinced Fox News to sue to stop the publication of Franken's 2003 book, *Lies And the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*. Franken's crime? Tweaking Fox by using its signature slogan "Fair and Balanced" in the book's subtitle. Fox claimed it was copyright infringement. (It's not. Satire is protected speech in the U.S.)

Amid courtroom laughter, a federal judge [denied](#) the injunction and labeled the case to "wholly without merit, both factually and legally." Three days later, Fox News dropped the lawsuit. But not before being widely mocked in the press for pursuing such a

pointless and frivolous case on O'Reilly's behalf, and not before the lawsuit publicity juiced sales of Franken's book. As Arianna Huffington later told the author, "It was as if Bill O'Reilly walked up to you and handed you a million dollars."

Handing out million-dollar bonuses marked a long way from O'Reilly's early days in journalism, when the now-Fox star was a journeyman reporter trying desperately to work his way up the broadcast news ladder.

After getting a degree from Boston University in 1973, he landed a \$150-a-week reporting job at WNEP-TV in Scranton, PA., as a consumer correspondent. Then he was onto jobs in Dallas and Denver. He worked as a news co-anchor in Hartford, CT., and arrived in New York City in 1980 as a reporter for the local CBS affiliate.

Along the way, he burned countless bridges. "In a business where there are a lot of reprehensible people, he stood out as particularly dishonest, obnoxious, self-centered," WFAA reporter Byron Harris once told *Rolling Stone*.

But it worked. Or it seemed to, when in March 1982 O'Reilly landed a coveted job at CBS as a correspondent for the *CBS Evening News*. Soon, he was shipped off to the Argentine capitol, Buenos Aires, to cover the Falklands War. But he battled with management, failed in the big leagues, and years later began to retell the history about his time at CBS -- only to be caught by *Mother Jones*.

At the time, just a few months after his Argentine adventure, O'Reilly took a job at Channel 7 in Boston, sliding down the career ladder from CBS *Evening News* correspondent to a weekend

anchor in the last-place station in the market. He was soon tapped to host the channel's softer program, *New England Afternoon*, a lifestyle show that followed the soap operas in the programming lineup. "It got clobbered by reruns of *The Love Boat*. It lasted six months," the *Boston Globe* [reported](#). O'Reilly rebounded in Portland, Oregon, where he anchored the news.

Less than a year later, though, he was back in Boston at Channel 5, and then got tapped for a return to network news. When he arrived at ABC News as a *World News Tonight* correspondent, he already had his eye on the top job. "I should be the anchor," O'Reilly would [tell](#) people.

But he never got close. "In the late 1980s, Bill O'Reilly was a second-tier correspondent at ABC News, scrapping to get air time. He walked with the same swagger he has today, but back then no one took it seriously. A good day was when Peter Jennings handed him the trifling task of doing the 30-second afternoon news break," according to the *Globe*.

In 1989, O'Reilly left ABC to host the syndicated tabloid show *Inside Edition*, which gave him a national profile. O'Reilly arrived as a correspondent, but four weeks later he took over the anchor chair from broadcast veteran David Frost. That same year, O'Reilly [toyed with the idea](#) of running for Congress by challenging Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA).

But like everywhere else he worked, O'Reilly clashed with management. He wanted complete control over the show and he was upset he wasn't being promoted enough; that he wasn't a household name like Maury Povich, who was hosting his own tabloid television show, *A Current Affair*.

So *Inside Edition* hired Deborah Norville instead, and O'Reilly headed to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in an effort to

reboot his career and maybe secure some of that mainstream credibility he always sought. He earned his master's degree in public administration in the spring of 1996. As the *Globe* put it, “his timing could not have been better. Rupert Murdoch had just hired Roger Ailes to start up the Fox News Channel.”

Propelled by the impeachment of Bill Clinton, followed closely by the Florida recount in 2000 and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Fox News’ ratings soared as it delivered an openly partisan take on the news and morphed into a permanent marketing arm of the Republican Party. O’Reilly rode the wave, ultimately in the 8 p.m. slot, to become the channel’s most visible star.

But even with his eight-figure Fox salary and his best-selling books, O’Reilly’s career, or at least his resume, still had gaps in it: His resume still said he came up through the ranks as a local and tabloid TV anchorman, straight out of a Will Ferrell casting call. (“[We’ll do it live! Fuck it!](#)”) And when O’Reilly had tried to make it in the big leagues of network news, he had failed. Twice.

Since then, O’Reilly has taken to reimagining his reporting past, making up stories about his wartime adventures, just like he’s made up stories about his athletic prowess. Why wasn’t Bill O’Reilly a network news star? Because the elites robbed him.

“At the risk of putting him on the couch, O’Reilly gives the impression of still wanting vindication for having left network news and charted his own course, at the newsmagazine ‘Inside Edition’ and for nearly two decades at Fox News,” [wrote](#) veteran television writer Brian Lowry. “While one might think the success he has enjoyed would be the sweetest revenge, the host’s actions have betrayed a desire for greater respect – including from the old-guard media Fox News regularly skewers – which might explain why the studio-based host is still telling war-reporting stories this many years later.”

And for O'Reilly, the flashpoint for resentment remains his brief time at CBS, and specifically when he was dispatched to cover the Falklands War. "It should have been his big break, but it didn't work out ... the CBS episode has stayed with him. It hurt -- it still hurts," wrote Nicholas Lemann in *The New Yorker* years ago.

What happened was O'Reilly and his cameraman got some great footage of a protest that had broken out in the streets of Buenos Aires after Argentina conceded defeat to the British. When his bosses, in a common move, instructed O'Reilly to give his footage up for a CBS *Evening News* piece reported by veteran correspondent Bob Schieffer, O'Reilly revolted. "I didn't come down here to have my footage used by that old man," O'Reilly [shouted](#) at his stunned boss, according to a former colleague. Days later, O'Reilly was sent packing and his CBS career was effectively over.

For O'Reilly, the Falklands War represented a professional turning point and became a lingering source of bitterness.

Is that what prompted him rewrite the history of his time there? Is that what triggered O'Reilly's decision to pretend he had suffered through a "war zone"? That he'd survived Falklands War "combat"?

Chapter Two

Argentina

The *Mother Jones* case against Bill O'Reilly was disarmingly straight forward: For years, the Fox host had boasted about the life-threatening work he'd done while covering the Falklands War, which erupted in April 1982 when Argentina occupied the British-ruled islands 300 miles off the country's southern coast. The ten-week battle ended when Argentina [surrendered](#) to the British on June 14, 1982.

Over and over since then O'Reilly had stressed his valor, and as *Mother Jones* reported, on occasions he seemed to even suggest he had stormed the island shores himself, pen in hand, to document the battles. "I've reported on the ground in active war zones from El Salvador to the Falklands," O'Reilly [announced](#) in 2001.

Not fair, O'Reilly [countered](#) amidst a storm of vitriol at the progressive magazine after news of his apparent fabrication broke and ridicule began to rain down on him. "Nobody was on the Falklands and I never said I was on the island, ever," he claimed. Yet the *Mother Jones* piece had [included](#) video of O'Reilly saying in 2013, "I was in a situation one time, in a war zone in Argentina, in the Falklands." That sure *sounded* like O'Reilly was placing himself, retroactively, at the center of the deadly action.

But okay, fine, O'Reilly says he didn't mean he literally landed *on* the Falkland Islands and watched the war unfold up-close. If you wanted to be generous, you might concede his point, which was that he simply meant to suggest he covered the conflict off the island, since virtually no American reporters made it onto the Falklands while the ten-week battle waged. (Argentine officials refused to allow journalists access to the isolated islands.) And the restricted warzone certainly made the conflict a unique one to cover.

And if the debate had simply centered around the semantics of being "on" the island, O'Reilly wouldn't have had much to fear.

But it didn't, and he did.

The problem was that unlike every other American reporter who was camped out in the Argentine capital Buenos Aires at the time of the war, O'Reilly decided that he had experienced "combat" in a "war zone." On a single night, he covered a nasty street protest that erupted outside the president's mansion, when it became clear to citizens they had been lied to about Argentina being on the cusp of winning the war. Over the years, O'Reilly has repeatedly come back to that experience to claim that, unlike other commentators who simply talk a big game, he has been in the field when the bullets were flying and he knows what war really is.

O'Reilly in [2001](#): "I've reported on the ground in active war zones from El Salvador to the Falkland Islands." O'Reilly in [2004](#): "I survived a combat situation in Argentina during the Falklands War." O'Reilly in [2004](#): "Having survived a combat situation in Argentina during the Falklands war, I know that life-and-death decisions are made in a flash." O'Reilly in [2008](#): "When I got shot at I was covering the Falklands war and I was based in Argentina in Buenos Aires."

But the boasts were bogus. In order to bolster his own image, O'Reilly simply invented his own definition of "combat," and set aside the [traditional one](#): "fighting between armed forces."

"By O'Reilly's definition, I am a virtual Medal of Honor recipient," [quipped](#) Richard Cohen in *The Washington Post*. "My combat tours included the Newark riots, the East Harlem riots, a disturbance in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn and lots of good times in Washington, where I inhaled tear gas during several peace demonstrations associated with the Vietnam War."

O'Reilly's defense further crumbled when scores of his former colleagues who had reported from Buenos Aires with him announced that the Fox host's retelling of the street protest bore no resemblance to reality. Contrary to O'Reilly's wild description of civilians being gunned down "in the streets" "with real bullets" by rampaging riot police, journalists at the scene only recalled a "[nasty](#)" protest that lasted a couple hours.

"It was not a war zone or even close," according to longtime CBS correspondent Eric Engberg, who filed from Buenos Aires during the Falklands War. "It was an 'expense account zone,'" Engberg wrote in a [Facebook](#) post after the controversy flared up. As for the single night of protests, "I am fairly certain that most professional journalists would refer to the story I have just related as 'routine reporting on a demonstration that got a little nasty.'"

But not Bill O'Reilly. "A major riot ensued and many were killed," O'Reilly [wrote](#) in his 2001 book, *The No Spin Zone*. "I was right in the middle of it and nearly died of a heart attack when a soldier, standing about ten feet away, pointed his automatic weapon directly at my head."

(That last part, about having a gun pointed at his head, represents a cinematic saga O'Reilly's told over and over through the years, although with slight alterations. It's *the* signature "combat" account that he has used to regale fans. But curiously, if O'Reilly told the story in real time, none of his CBS colleagues seem to remember it, as none came forward once O'Reilly's stories came under scrutiny to confirm hearing about the gun-pointed-at-my-head story in Buenos Aires.)

Meanwhile, the [trigger](#) to O'Reilly's [heroic act](#) allegedly [came](#) when his cameraman (or "photographer," depending on the telling) was seriously injured, suffering a blow to the head ("bleeding from the ear"), and O'Reilly had to "save" him. Then came the shocking appearance of the young soldier who raised his gun and pointed it at the reporter's head, only to be dissuaded -- in some [versions](#) of O'Reilly's tale -- with a passing Spanish phrase.

As Engberg stressed, if a CBS employee had been attacked or injured that night, or any night, that fact would've been immediately reported to CBS superiors in Buenos Aires. But no such notification was given in connection to O'Reilly's work, and [none of his colleagues](#) who were on the ground in Buenos Aires seem to remember this happening.

As for the dead bodies that night outside La Casa Rosada, the executive mansion of Argentina's president, nobody else but O'Reilly ever reported seeing any. None of the dispatches at the time from Western news organizations mentioned any fatalities in

connection with the protests. And at least one local historian [confirmed](#) to *The Washington Post* that, “there were no people killed at the protests.”

So, if there were no dead bodies, and there was no injured cameraman, and there were no reports of soldiers taking aim at journalists that night, what was O'Reilly left with? He was left with a [cavalcade of comrades](#) who, despite having nothing to gain from coming forward, went on the record accusing O'Reilly of making stuff up.

*Former CBS cameraman [Manny Alvarez](#): "Nobody remembers this happening."

*Former CBS sound engineer [Jim Forrest](#): “I was on that crew, and I don't recall his version of events.” He added, “There were certainly no dead people. Had there been dead people, they would have sent more camera crews.”

*Former CNN Reporter [Jim Clancy](#): “I was there...it is clear to me Bill O'Reilly is not truthful.”

*Former CBS News correspondent [Charles Gomez](#) said he “did not see any bloodshed” while covering the street protest.

*Former NBC News correspondent [George Lewis](#) stressed the protest was “not a combat situation.”

*Former CBS News correspondent [Charles Krause](#) called O'Reilly's description of events in Buenos Aires “absurd,” adding, “there was very little evidence of the war in Buenos Aires. The war was being fought thousands of miles away.”

And then there was former CBS correspondent Engberg who was the most emphatic in his denunciations of O'Reilly's “combat”

narrative. “[O’Reilly’s] not a real reporter. He was not in a combat zone that night. This was not a combat zone. Not even close,” Engberg [told](#) CNN.

In the wake of the *Mother Jones* story, O’Reilly had a tough time fashioning a defense. At first, the host went into bluster mode, [calling](#) Corn a “left-wing assassin,” “a guttersnipe liar,” and “a disgusting piece of garbage” who deserved “to be in the kill zone.”

O’Reilly largely refused to engage in the facts of the story, insisting that because the article came from *Mother Jones*, a left-leaning magazine, it wasn’t worth serious consideration. (He [called it](#) “a giant piece of defamation”; O’Reilly has filed no lawsuit against *Mother Jones*.)

And for the first couple days it looked like the “combat” controversy might be waged on the left/right partisan axis, and that if O’Reilly kept yelling “liberal” loud enough the story might not stick. Fox management fully backed its star and publicly stood by his version of events. (O’Reilly’s Fox colleagues were another matter: Other than the channel’s media reporter, Howard Kurtz, who helped O’Reilly do damage control, there was complete on-air silence from them as the controversy unfolded.)

What Fox management apparently did not know was that the host had lied about lots of things with regards to his reporting past; that the host had a determined predisposition to creating a mythology around himself as being some sort of war correspondent who gallantly charged into danger in search of breaking news. Apparently, that’s who Fox thought it had hired nearly 20 years ago when the cable channel went on the air in 1996, because that’s certainly the professional self-portrait O’Reilly had painted of himself over the years.

When the *Mother Jones* controversy didn't immediately evaporate, O'Reilly tried to stitch together an explanation, or at least a semi-believable defense, for his exaggerating ways. And he thought he found his way out of the jam when he discovered a June 15, 1983, *New York Times* dispatch from Buenos Aires, which O'Reilly [quoted](#) at length on the air on Fox News:

“Fires appeared in several nearby intersections as demonstrators throw wastebaskets into them and set them ablaze to slow the police. One large grey van pulled into an intersection a block from the plaza. Policemen emerged, seizing anyone they could. One policeman pulled a pistol firing five shots. The leaders of the ten political parties, in a statement tonight, denounced the police's brutal repression in a flagrant violation of the public faith.”

See! Even the liberal *New York Times* reported a policeman had fired shots at demonstrators! Or so went the O'Reilly spin, as he announced he had been vindicated.

Not quite. As the author of the story, Rich Meislin, quickly [pointed out](#) in a Facebook post, O'Reilly left out the end of the key sentence from the original *Times* report: "One policeman pulled a pistol, firing five shots *over the heads of fleeing demonstrators.*" [Emphasis added.] "As far as I know, no demonstrators were shot or killed by police in Buenos Aires that night," wrote Meislin. "What I saw on the streets that night was a demonstration -- passionate, chaotic and memorable -- but it would be hard to confuse it with being in a war zone.”

The only one who confused the street protest with a war zone was O'Reilly.

Another priceless maneuver early on in the controversy was when O'Reilly [told](#) an interviewer asking about his Buenos Aires

reporting: “I laid this out in a book called, *Those Who Trespass*. That was the first book that I wrote. Soup to nuts, what happened in Buenos Aires during the Falklands war.”

Those Who Trespass laid everything out, O’Reilly stressed. But *Those Who Trespass* was a *work of fiction*. And what a piece of work it was.

“‘Those Who Trespass’ is a revenge fantasy, and it displays extraordinarily violent impulses,” Nicholas Lemann [once wrote](#) at *The New Yorker*. In the novel, O’Reilly used the Falklands War as the backdrop to tell the story of Irish-American TV journalist Shannon Michaels, who set out to systematically kill everyone who had thwarted his career.

“Michaels stalks the woman who forced his resignation from the network and throws her off a balcony,” wrote Lemann. “He next murders a television research consultant who had advised the local station to dismiss him: he buries the guy in beach sand up to his neck and lets him slowly drown.”

That’s the book O’Reilly pointed to as the definitive explanation for what unfolded in Buenos Aires?

O’Reilly’s warfare delusion reeks of somebody who’s never actually experienced -- or covered -- warfare, and who instead decided to systematically conflate a night of sporadic street violence with a “combat” “war zone.”

Why the manic desire to make himself into something that he’s not? And who has O’Reilly been trying to impress all these years? Most people would consider [\\$20 million](#) for hosting a five-days-a-week talk show as proof of success. But O’Reilly’s clearly seeking

something more, and he's been chasing it his entire career. It's something he can't attain, so he fakes it; just makes it up and pretends he was some sort of Zelig-like character from the world of 1980s war correspondents. And then he has the gall to lecture colleagues like Brian Williams who get caught stretching the truth. ("Stop the corruption," O'Reilly [told](#) his viewers, "and begin telling the truth without an agenda.")

And why do the lies revolve around warfare?

Professionally, O'Reilly has an odd relationship with the U.S. military and with serving his country. That tension has been clear for years. (In 2001, when he sent free copies of his book *Pinheads and Patriots* to U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, some troops [burned](#) theirs and posted pictures online.)

O'Reilly's persona, and the one he's ridden to multi-millionaire success, is that he's a working class kid from Levittown, New York who refused to take short cuts and who still beats the rich-kid swells at their own game of corporate success. He worked harder than everyone else and relied on his street smarts to navigate the game that chattering class fakes try to rig. And as today's most famous conservative commentator, he's still looking out for middle class warriors, including those serving in the U.S. military.

That's the class-resentment persona O'Reilly has perfected. And it's one he's pounded into readers' and viewers' imagination for years. ("[Whatever I have done or will do in this life, I'm working-class Irish American Bill O'Reilly.](#)")

The reality? O'Reilly graduated from a private high school in 1967 at the height of the Vietnam War and got a college deferment, exempting him from being drafted alongside the blue-collar Levittown guys.

By the fall of his junior year in 1969, as the war raged and nearly 11,000 Americans died in Vietnam, O'Reilly was boarding a steamer, setting off for a year abroad to study at Queen Mary University of London.

“I felt terrible for our troops in Vietnam because some of them were my friends and I knew they were good people,” O'Reilly wrote in his 2008 book, *A Bold Fresh Piece of Humanity*. “Most of the neighborhood guys who did not have that advantage [of college deferment] were called up, and many shipped out to Southeast Asia.”

When O'Reilly graduated college in 1971, and with the war still years away from a peace settlement, he could have volunteered to serve his country. But he did not.

Later in life, as a full-time cultural warrior who battled fictitious fronts such as the War On Christmas, O'Reilly seemed to try to make up for that gap in his blue-collar resume by concocting wild stories about his “combat” valor.

“He skipped Vietnam, and since we did not declare war on Spain, he had to do the next best thing: transform Buenos Aires into a battlefield, and TV reporting into combat,” [wrote](#) Ohio State University history professor Steven Conn. “If Bill O'Reilly had actually served in Vietnam, he might have been humbled enough by the experience to know when to shut up about war zones.”

In a weird way, O'Reilly used his “war zone” lies to try to bond with U.S. servicemen and women.

“You veterans out there listening right now, you know exactly what I'm talking about here,” O'Reilly [announced](#) to radio listeners in 2004, drawing a direct line between his “combat” reporting and their service on the front lines. “Adrenaline surges, your senses

become very attune, much sharper than they are ordinarily, and you are locked in, focused in, on your survival and achieving the means of staying alive.”

Message: He’s just like the grunts in the trenches. O’Reilly stressed how he “volunteered” for this duty. “Nobody sent me. Nobody forced me.”

Perhaps more importantly, O’Reilly has used his puffed up credentials as a way to shield critics. “I hear all the time, ‘OK, O’Reilly, you never were in the military so you can’t comment on Iran or Iraq or Afghanistan,” he [lamented](#) in 2008.

“And I mean, that’s insane. And then, of course, my comeback is gee, I missed you in El Salvador. Maybe you were there in Morazán when I was there but I didn’t see you. And then in the Falklands War, I just didn’t see you in Buenos Aires or Montevideo. I was there, but I didn’t see you. So then I can knock that down, because I’ve seen the combat up close and personal. I didn’t have a gun, I had a pen.”

According to O’Reilly, he can pontificate about the wisdom of warfare because he’s “seen the combat up close and personal.” Like in Buenos Aires when he covered a street protest that one night. Today, he pats himself on the back for summoning the courage to face the perils of “combat,” long after the Vietnam War ended.

“I respect myself for” going into combat, O’Reilly once [announced](#) on his syndicated radio show. He described to listeners how it was essential to go into combat in order to check off “the box,” stressing “you got to respect” people who “check the box” by going into combat:

“Even if it were one of the smear merchants, even if it were

Michael Moore. If Michael Moore had checked the box -- yes, I will go into combat -- I would respect that. But, of course, Michael Moore did not check the box.

Now, I, your humble correspondent, did check the box. Not in Vietnam, but in El Salvador, in Falklands War, and in Northern Ireland. I checked that box. And I respect myself for checking the box.”

I will go into combat.

In O'Reilly's mind that's what he did in Argentina, just like the U.S. troops who served in Khe Sanh or An Loc.

What's wrong with all this combat self-mythology that O'Reilly traffics in?

“Men and women have fought, died, been wounded, and scarred by war. There are many journalists who actually were in the crossfire, who died, trying to bring the story to the American people,” [said](#) Jon Soltz, chairman of VoteVets.org, a 400,000-member organization that advocates for vets and military families. “What Bill O'Reilly has done is steal their valor, and it is wrong.”

Because O'Reilly's career now exists almost exclusively within the secure confines of the conservative media where players are rarely asked to explain themselves or answer for contradictions, he's rarely been challenged in-person about his tall tales about his “combat” service. But when he hosted a national radio show, the bubble was [briefly punctured](#) from a caller named Roger from Portland, Oregon.

O'Reilly had just finished pontificating about what he'd do if faced with a life-or-death “combat” scenario:

O'REILLY: But I'll tell you what, I've been in combat. I've seen it, I've been close to it. And if my unit is in danger and I've got a captured guy and he knows where the enemy is and I'm looking him in the eye, the guy better tell me. That's all I'm going to tell you. If it's life or death he's going first. Roger, in Portland, Oregon. What say you, Roger?

ROGER: Hey, Bill. Bill, first things first, you just said you've been in combat, but you've never been in the military have you?

O'REILLY: No I have not.

ROGER: So why do you say you've been in combat?

O'REILLY: Why do I say that Roger because I was in the middle of a couple fire fights in South and Central America.

ROGER: But you're a media guy.

O'REILLY: Yeah a media guy with a pen not a gun and people were shooting at me, Roger.

ROGER: People might think that you actually were in the military.

O'REILLY: We don't want to mislead anybody. But I made it quite clear.

ROGER: That's not fair and balanced.

O'REILLY; In many, many circumstances ... Hey listen Roger, you know what, you can take your little fair and balanced snip remark and shove it! Okay? You're not getting on this air and you, Mr. Macho Man, would have never come

close to anything that I've done down where I've been, ok?
So take a walk and well, enough said.

When Roger from Portland saw through the mythology O'Reilly has worked so hard to create, the host snapped. He told the caller to "shove it," claimed he was tougher than Roger would ever be, and then tossed him off the air, exercising the power of veto that all radio talk show hosts treasure.

But Roger was right. O'Reilly's claims of "combat" have always been a marketing ploy.

Chapter Three

JFK

When police [arrived](#) at the seaside home in Manalapan, Florida, on the afternoon of March 29, 1977, George de Mohrenschildt was already dead, his body slumped in a hallway chair on the second floor, as blood accumulated on the floor around him. Dressed in a blue, long-sleeve turtle-neck sweater, pants and socks, de Mohrenschildt, 65, had placed a double-barrel shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

According to the police report, when detectives examined the body, they found in his pocket a “newspaper article from the March 20, 1977 edition of the *Dallas Morning News*, which indicated that the deceased may possibly have been involved in, or have knowledge of, some type of conspiracy in the” assassination of President John F. Kenney, fourteen years earlier.

Indeed, two events closely linked to the Kennedy assassination investigation had shaped de Mohrenschildt’s final day. In the morning, he drove a rental car up Florida’s Gold Coast to Palm Beach and the opulent Breakers Hotel. There, [he met](#) with investigative journalist Edward Epstein, who was writing about the

Kennedy assassination for *Reader's Digest*. The national monthly magazine had agreed to pay de Mohrenschildt \$4,000 if he'd cooperate with Epstein and tell what he knew about Lee Harvey Oswald and events surrounding the president's killing.

And on that topic, de Mohrenschildt was an expert. He served as a key witness for the Warren Commission, which was established to investigate the assassination. The commission's printed record included 118 pages of testimony from de Mohrenschildt. Why? "de Mohrenschildt knew Oswald better than anyone else alive, except perhaps for Oswald's wife, Marina, from September, 1962, until April, 1963 -- when de Mohrenschildt moved from Dallas," according to author George McMillan in the *Washington Post*.

A petroleum engineer by trade, de Mohrenschildt, who was born in Russia, moved to Dallas in the 1950s and settled in with the city's Russian émigré colony, where he met Oswald and his Russian wife after they returned to the United States after living in Minsk, Russia for three years.

Following the assassination, conspiracies blossomed, in part because of rumors surrounding de Mohrenschildt's work for the CIA. A decade after the assassination, Dutch journalist Willem Oltmans claimed that de Mohrenschildt suddenly changed his story and told him "a conspiracy of anti-Castro Cubans and Texas oilmen, including the late millionaire H.L. Hunt, had actually arranged Kennedy's death."

So fast forward to 1977 and de Mohrenschildt was making headlines again. His meeting at the Breakers with Epstein ended at noon. The two men agreed to meet again that day at 3 p.m. and continue their conversation. In the meantime, de Mohrenschildt drove back to Manalapan for a light lunch. When he arrived back at the residence, he learned that while he was out, Gaeton Fonzi, an investigator for the House Committee on Assassinations, had

stopped by, asking to speak with de Mohrenschildt. Fonzi left his card and said he would return later that afternoon. The news of Fonzi's visit seemed to upset de Mohrenschildt, according to the house maid.

Less than two hours later, de Mohrenschildt "walked out of the bedroom, turned to his left and entered a small hallway off the main hallway in which there was a chair and a chest of drawers. The victim loaded the weapon, sat in the chair, placed the barrel in his mouth, and pulled the trigger," according to the police report.

Incredibly, guess who was on the front porch at that very moment, knocking on the door in pursuit of de Mohrenschildt, and guess who "heard" the gunshot that ended the international raconteur's life?

Bill O'Reilly.

As a "reporter knocked on the door of de Mohrenschildt's daughter's home, he heard the shotgun blast that marked the suicide of the Russian," O'Reilly [wrote](#) in his 2012 best-selling non-fiction book *Killing Kennedy*. "... that reporter's name is Bill O'Reilly."

O'Reilly repeatedly made that claim while trying to sell books in recent years: As a young reporter working for WFAA-TV in Dallas, O'Reilly says, he had rushed to Florida on a hot tip regarding de Mohrenschildt's whereabouts.

O'Reilly [wrote](#) in [*Kennedy's Last Days*](#), the 2013 adaption of *Killing Kennedy* for younger readers: "As I knocked on the door, I heard a shotgun blast. He had killed himself." And during an October 2, 2012, appearance on *Fox & Friends*, O'Reilly claimed he "was about to knock on the door where [de Mohrenschildt] was, his daughter's house, and he blew his brains out with a shotgun."

There's no evidence this is true, and substantial evidence suggests it's false.

From eyewitnesses, to police reports and the statements of O'Reilly's former colleagues, every fact suggests that O'Reilly was not present when de Mohrenschildt pulled the trigger. Yet years later O'Reilly repeatedly claimed to have been at the scene at the time of death. Indeed, by insisting he was closing on a hot JFK assassination story and was knocking on de Mohrenschildt's door, O'Reilly seemed to imply that his presence might have even sparked the suicide attempt as de Mohrenschildt felt dogged, truth-seeking forces (Fonzi and O'Reilly) closing in on him.

But why make up such a bizarre claim? Aside from the trend we've already documented of O'Reilly's personal penchant for wartime self-aggrandizement, there was the fact that O'Reilly's first foray into historical non-fiction, *Killing Lincoln*, had been a commercial blockbuster, selling more than two million copies. But historians [ridiculed the book](#) for its sloppy errors and its complete lack of documentation.

The follow-up book was *Killing Kennedy*. Perhaps in an effort to polish his credentials as an authority, O'Reilly presented himself as an expert with first-hand knowledge. "There were rumors [de Mohrenschildt] was murdered," O'Reilly [told](#) *USA Today* at the time of the book's publication. "But I found no evidence of that." He added: "I'm still working the story. There's something there. What it is, I just don't know."

See? O'Reilly's "still working the story." He was out gumshoeing and looking for clues. "I don't want to sound defensive," O'Reilly told *USA Today*, "but either you believe what we wrote, or you don't."

Don't.

There is simply no reason to believe that O'Reilly "heard" the gunshot that ended de Mohrenschildt's life. In 2013, Kennedy assassination expert and former *Washington Post* editor Jefferson Morley wrote about O'Reilly's implausible tale at JFKFacts.org. It didn't receive much attention at the time, but it effectively debunked the story.

For instance, the detailed police report from the Manalapan, Florida, suicide scene confirmed that de Mohrenschildt's self-inflicted gunshot "went unheard by Mrs. Viisola, who was working in the kitchen below, as well as by [cook] Miss [Lillian] Romanic, who was sunning herself in the back yard; and by the gardener, Coley Wimbley, who also was at the rear of the house in the garden." Neighbors Dianne and Laurie Tisdale "were working in an apartment above the garage...Neither of them stated that they heard a gunshot."

People outside *and* inside the house didn't hear the gunshot, but O'Reilly standing on the front porch did?

That makes no sense.

What also made no sense was that the house staff made no mention of O'Reilly's alleged visit to the house, and neither did the police report, which interviewed everyone on the scene that day.

In the wake of the *Mother Jones* controversy, *Media Matters* did additional reporting that suggested that O'Reilly had simply made the story up. Just like with O'Reilly's Falklands fiasco, working journalists with knowledge of the suicide story lined up to call the Fox host a liar. But this time, O'Reilly and Fox had no response.

“Bill O'Reilly's a phony, there's no other way to put it,” Tracy Rowlett [told](#) *Media Matters*. Rowlett's a former WFAA reporter and anchor who worked at the station in Dallas with O'Reilly in 1977. “He was not up on the porch when he heard the gunshots, he was in Dallas. He wasn't traveling at that time.”

“O'Reilly was chasing this story, but he wasn't there, he made it sound like he was more on the scene than he was, it was show business,” [Morley](#) told *Media Matters*. “Bill O'Reilly did not hear a gunshot from 1,200 miles away, you know? He made this story up,” he [added](#) on CNN.

Reporter Epstein wrote a March 9 *Newsweek* [piece](#) calling O'Reilly's JFK claim “impossible,” adding: “How do I know? I was the actual -- and only -- reporter interviewing de Mohrenschildt on the last day of his life in 1977.”

And one other key point raised by Rowlett: “I don't remember O'Reilly claiming that he was there. That came later, that must have been a brain surge when he was writing the book.”

Indeed, it appears O'Reilly only decided to insert himself into the tantalizing suicide story years later. For instance, in 1992 O'Reilly's *Inside Edition* [reported](#) on documents relating to the Kennedy assassination. During that report, O'Reilly simply told viewers, “moments before he was to be interviewed by House investigators, de Mohrenschildt blew his brains out with a 20-gauge shotgun.” No mention of young O'Reilly knocking on the door.

Ultimately, who was the key source who doomed O'Reilly's gripping narrative about the de Mohrenschildt suicide? Bill O'Reilly himself.

Morley in 2013 reported on phone conversations that were taped between O'Reilly and congressional investigator Fonzi on March 29, 1977, the day of the suicide. O'Reilly was [scrambling](#) for details and making plans to travel to Florida *the next day* to cover the story. After *Media Matters* called attention to O'Reilly's tale, CNN obtained the tapes from Fonzi's widow and played the damning evidence to a national audience.

O'REILLY: Okay. So, he committed suicide, he's dead?

FONZI: Yeah.

O'REILLY: Okay, what time?

FONZI: Late this afternoon, I don't know.

O'REILLY: Okay, gun?

FONZI: Yeah, I think they said he shot himself.

O'REILLY: Okay. Ah, Jesus Christ.

FONZI: Isn't that something?

O'REILLY: Now, we gotta get this guy Epstein. I'm coming down there tomorrow. I'm coming to Florida. We gotta get this guy. He knows. He knows what happened.

Moments later, O'Reilly elaborated on his itinerary: "Now, okay, I'm gonna try to get a night flight out of here, if I can. But I might have to go tomorrow morning. Let me see."

And with that and the *Media Matters* report, Fox News and O'Reilly basically [went silent](#). What had been a very loud, very boisterous campaign to fight *Mother Jones* and its allegations

about O'Reilly fabrications, featuring a series of scathing, name-calling ("guttersnipe") interviews, was quickly extinguished.

It was as if someone very high up at Fox News realized [the futility](#) of arguing the JFK story -- and realized the whole story made Fox's most famous host look utterly ridiculous -- and simply decided to flip the off switch. And with that, Fox's famed public relations machine disengaged.

"The landscape had shifted and he couldn't call everybody a liar and a guttersnipe," Corn at *Mother Jones* told *Media Matters*. "How many guttersnipes are there to go around?"

It's true that one week after CNN's report, O'Reilly made a small, futile attempt to prop up his de Mohrenschildt tale by pointing to a statement from his former WFAA colleague Bob Sirkin, who claimed he was with O'Reilly in Florida on the day of de Mohrenschildt's suicide.

But even Sirkin, O'Reilly's only defender on the story, was unable [to corroborate](#) the Fox host's claim that he heard the gunshot that killed de Mohrenschildt. According to Sirkin, he and O'Reilly had "split up" that afternoon and did not "reconnect" until after the death, so Sirkin had no first-hand knowledge of what transpired at the house that day. And Sirkin couldn't offer any explanation for the existence of O'Reilly's own recorded remarks that he wasn't in Florida on the day of the suicide, [telling](#) CNN he was "befuddled by it."

Yet as new evidence of O'Reilly's lies piled up, Fox remained stubbornly silent. Still refusing to concede the obvious errors in O'Reilly's way, the cable channel insisted its host was the victim of "an orchestrated campaign by far left advocates" and called responding to such allegations "an exercise in futility."

They got the “futility” part right.

Chapter Four

El Salvador

Returning to war-torn El Salvador from a [five-day](#) nuns retreat in early December 1980, Ita Ford and Maura Clarke were met at San Salvador’s international airport by fellow nun Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan. The four American churchwomen were dedicated social justice workers, and had first arrived in El Salvador to administer to the poor through educational and religious outreach.

But as civil war and violence began to consume Central America’s smallest country, claiming more than 75,000 lives over 12 years, the American churchwomen spent more time transporting refugees to relief centers, escorting the wounded to clinics, and counseling families who had lost members to roaming, government-backed death squads.

In 1980 alone, nearly [10,000](#) Salvadoran citizens were killed, including poor farmers, students, workers, and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, [Óscar Romero](#), who was fatally shot by an assassin while saying mass. Nuns, priests, and charity workers

like Romero who aided the poor -- and denounced the death squads -- were deemed to be leftist sympathizers by the brutal, right-wing regime.

Still, the holy women persevered. “They don't kill blond-haired, blue-eyed North Americans,” Donovan once [joked](#) to a friend who urged her to leave the chaotic country. But as the churchwomen pulled away from the airport on the night of December 2, 1980, it would be the last time they were seen alive.

The next morning, a farmer delivering milk [discovered](#) their bodies, brutalized and shot execution-style. Locals dug a common grave and buried the bullet-ridden remains on top of each other. The van the American women had been driving was found burned and gutted, its license plates removed.

On December 4, when a [pastor](#) was told about the unexpected burial of “four unidentified white women,” frantic church officials rushed to the scene, along with the United States Ambassador, Robert White. Upon exhumation, it was discovered the victims had been raped and then shot in the head at close range. Ambassador White immediately suspected that government-backed killers were responsible for the deadly attack. (Four Salvadorian National Guardsmen were later convicted of the crime.) It was the first time American clergy had been targeted and killed by a Salvadorian death squad.

“This particular act of barbarism,” a 1993 State Department report [stated](#), “did more to inflame the debate over El Salvador in the United States than any other single incident.”

Incredibly, guess who was there lurking and watching in the El Salvador night when the guardsmen murdered the four American churchwomen and left their bodies by the side of the road?

Bill O'Reilly.

"I've seen guys gun down nuns in El Salvador," he [announced](#) on the September 27, 2005, edition of his talk-radio program *The Radio Factor*. And on the December 14, 2012, edition of his Fox News show, O'Reilly spoke of having to explain the "concept of evil" to his mother, telling her "I was in El Salvador and I saw nuns get shot in the back of the head."

But it's not true. O'Reilly wasn't even in El Salvador in 1980. He never saw the American nuns get shot. O'Reilly was not the long-lost witness to one of the most infamous human rights crimes of that era, a fictional role that remains with James Woods -- the "heroic yet flawed journalist" who [witnessed the murders](#) in Oliver Stone's *Salvador*.

O'Reilly has himself debunked this stunning claim, at least in more sober accounts of his time in El Salvador.

As *Media Matters* [reported](#), in his book *The No Spin Zone*, O'Reilly devotes several pages to his time covering the civil war in El Salvador, where he claims he started "a few weeks" after he was promoted to CBS News correspondent -- a promotion that came after the shootings took place. And in a 2009 television interview, O'Reilly again [confirmed](#) he had arrived in Central America "right after" the churchwomen killings in December of the previous year.

Of course, the women were executed under the cover of darkness. If O'Reilly *had* been there to witness "nuns get shot in the back of the head," he likely would have ended up in a shallow grave himself. But like his Falklands War fabrications, O'Reilly seems endlessly drawn towards improving upon his reporting resume and repeatedly lying about his experience with dangerous events in war-torn countries.

O'Reilly's decision to concoct a fabrication around the killing of the nuns infuriated both those close to the victims, as well as journalists who risked their lives covering the Central American civil war. "[We] were deeply saddened when our sisters were killed in El Salvador and shocked when we learned of Mr. O'Reilly's statement inferring he had witnessed their murder," a spokesperson for the Maryknoll Sisters [told](#) CNN.

"It's disgusting, it's reprehensible," [added](#) Patti Blum, an attorney who worked with the families on a civil case for the Center for Justice and Accountability. "To use the death of four women who were in El Salvador just to do good for your own self-aggrandizement is unsavory."

And combat photographer Susan Meiselas, who was [at the site](#) when the churchwomen's bodies were exhumed, [told](#) *Media Matters*, "for someone to pretend to have participated in that or witnessed it, it's outrageous."

O'Reilly's belated [explanation](#) when he was called to account? He claimed that when he said he "saw nuns get shot in the back of the head," he meant he'd seen "horrendous images" of nuns murdered while reporting from El Salvador, not witnessing those murders firsthand. His absurd walkback did not address his even more detailed radio show claim, when he suggested he had seen the guardsmen themselves, caught in the act: "I've seen guys gun down nuns in El Salvador."

So according to O'Reilly, you're a "combat" correspondent if you cover a street protest, like Buenos Aires, and/or someone shows you pictures of people killed during a civil war, like in El Salvador? Fox News management actually felt comfortable offering that up as an explanation for O'Reilly's El Salvador folly?

Not only was it offensive of O'Reilly to try to use the targeted killings of four American churchwomen to boost his own ego and resume, but it was disrespectful to casually make up tales about a civil war that claimed the lives of so many journalists. [According](#) to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 24 journalists were killed in El Salvador over the course of the twelve-year war.

“I think it was one of the worst stories one could cover,” Bernard Diederich, *Time*'s former bureau chief in the region, [once recalled](#) to *Columbia Journalism Review*. “You'd go out in the morning and do the body count ... It was mad.”

In March 1982, four members of a Dutch television crew [were shot](#) and killed in a rural part of El Salvador. The journalists were targeted after government officials suspected them of being guerilla sympathizers. That same week in San Salvador, a right-wing group distributed a death list containing the names of 35 journalists, including famous war correspondents for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, NBC News, and other American outlets.

It was, in fact, a dangerous time to be a journalist in El Salvador, and many got a lot closer to the atrocities than the after-the-fact photographs O'Reilly now cites.

But was the execution of the nuns O'Reilly's only El Salvador fabrication?

O'Reilly often points to his brief stint in El Salvador as further proof that he's done the dangerous work; that he's “checked the box” in terms of war reporting duty and put his life on the line for a good story, experiencing “firefights” and “combat.” Over and over, O'Reilly has stressed how he willingly walked into the El Salvador killing zone and lived to tell the tale.

“Before I went to El Salvador in 1981, I talked with some experienced Latin American experts, people who had seen the brutal wars down there for themselves. I had never been in a war zone before, so I wanted some prep,” he [said](#) in 2002.

For O’Reilly, his El Salvador reporting, like Argentina, was another way for him to bond with actual war veterans. “And all of you war veterans listening know what I’m talking about here,” he [announced](#) in 2006, as he regaled his radio listeners with “combat” tales from El Salvador. “You’re trained to be there, keep your composure under unbelievable stress. There isn’t anything more stressful in the whole world than that. That’s the most stressful condition you can ever be in, close-quarter combat.”

But as *Media Matters* reported, O’Reilly has told strikingly contradictory stories about his El Salvador reporting trip, switching between vivid claims of being caught up in guerilla firefights and flat statements that the majority of his time in El Salvador was conflict-free.

For example, note that in his 2006 radio show [explanation](#) of the stress of “close-quarter combat,” O’Reilly got quite detailed and claimed he had witnessed a wild “firefight” with “guerrillas all over the place” and “people just shooting everywhere.” According to O’Reilly, this particular battle was at an army base in San Francisco Gotera, a city in the Morazán province in El Salvador that O’Reilly was sent to as a CBS correspondent.

As O’Reilly explained on his radio show, this was the “first time I saw combat” and “it was -- and when you see what happens when people start to shoot at each other, it is nothing like the movies. It’s nothing like -- it’s just sheer panic. All right? People just shooting everywhere, running everywhere. Screaming, noise, chaos.”

San Francisco Gotera was, in fact, fought over by rebels and the government [repeatedly](#) during the civil war, conflicts that were extensively [covered](#) by American journalists [in the area](#).

But in describing his trip to the Morazán for CBS in two of his autobiographies, O'Reilly made no mention of those dramatic details at the army base. Instead, he [described](#) his time in San Francisco Gotera as relatively uneventful, including just a brief story of a garrison captain whipping his own soldiers for falling asleep on guard duty. The allegedly harrowing firefight was also absent from the segment CBS News aired based on O'Reilly's reporting in the region in 1982.

After the alleged firefight in San Francisco Gotera, O'Reilly and his crew reportedly pressed on to the town of Meanguera, which a local captain allegedly claimed had been “wiped out.” The trip was through a “guerrilla-controlled area” that O'Reilly nevertheless navigated “without incident a few hours later,” as recounted in his book.

According to O'Reilly in *The No Spin Zone*, when he got to the town, “The place was leveled to the ground and fires were still smoldering. But even though the carnage was obviously recent, we saw no one live or dead. There was absolutely nobody around who could tell us what happened.”

By contrast, what did O'Reilly report back in 1982?

He reported something much different, and something far less life-threatening, on both locales. As a correspondent for the *CBS Evening News*, O'Reilly did report from Meanguera. But rather than recounting in his *Evening News* segment a chaotic “firefight” on the way to the village with “guerrillas all over the place,” O'Reilly stressed, “These days, Salvadoran soldiers appear to be

doing more singing than fighting, even here in the northeast, the heart of rebel country.”

And for anyone who watched the original 90-second CBS [report](#), it’s obvious that contrary to O’Reilly’s later dramatic retelling in *No Spin Zone* (“no one live or dead”), the entire population of Meanguera had *not* been wiped out, because right there on the CBS clip were apparently unharmed locals going about their daily lives while O’Reilly filmed his dispatch.

So in real time for CBS in 1982, O’Reilly made no mention of any fierce and fatal firefight in the Morazán province of El Salvador, and he did not claim the town of Meanguera had been “wiped out.” By 2001, when he sat down to write *No Spin Zone*, the residents he seemingly found alive in Meanguera were now dead, but the dramatic guerrilla firefight at the San Francisco Gotera army base was still absent.

Yet in 2006, while hosting his radio show, O’Reilly suddenly recalled *both* his trip to the town where “everybody was dead” and the life-threatening event and harrowing details of the gun battle at the army base. An “unbelievably intense” “close-quarter combat” [experience](#) that “all of you war veterans listening” would understand.

Since the mid-2000s, O’Reilly has preferred the I-was-shot-at-in-El-Salvador version of events. On his Fox News show in 2012, O’Reilly [told](#) a guest who said she had left El Salvador as a war refugee, “when you left El Salvador in 1982 I was there getting shot at.” And earlier this year in a radio interview O’Reilly claimed, “I’ve been shot at a couple of times, once in Argentina. We were in a fort in San Francisco Gotera that took fire in El Salvador.”

By all indications, O'Reilly's brief foray into war reporting from El Salvador was relatively un-eventful. Over time, however, he worked hard to make his stay more memorable. And if that meant lying about witnessing the ruthless execution of four American churchwomen, and if it meant suddenly completely retelling his tale about being caught in Central American firefights, then so be it.

Bill O'Reilly had an image he was determined to sell.

Chapter Five

Northern Ireland and Los Angeles

In Argentina and El Salvador, Bill O'Reilly had checked off “the box” of combat duty and years later made sure everyone knew about it. He wasn't just a self-described “champion bloviator.” Bill O'Reilly was a fearless correspondent who had seen up-close how war could make men do dark and dangerous things.

The final two documented examples of O'Reilly fabricating his reporting past revolve around two touchstone events where bloody violence spilled out onto the streets, where innocent victims were gunned down at random, and Bill O'Reilly was supposedly there to document it all: The interminable civil war that was tearing Northern Ireland apart in 1984 when O'Reilly showed up for duty (aka “the Troubles”), and the cauldron of urban violence that engulfed Los Angeles in the riot of 1992. Both were hallmark events and both required journalists, at times, to put their lives at risk to get the story. As someone who'd survived the “war zone” in Argentina and a guerilla “firefight” in El Salvador, Bill O'Reilly likely thought himself the perfect man for the job.

In his 2013 book, “[*Keep It Pithy*](#),” the Fox News host recounted, “I've seen soldiers gun down unarmed civilians in Latin America,

Irish terrorists kill and maim their fellow citizens in Belfast with bombs.” Elsewhere he [said](#), “I’ve covered four wars,” listing off El Salvador, the Falklands, an unspecified conflict in Israel, and Northern Ireland. “I’ve seen the best and the worst.”

As his other tales were exposed as fabrications, the claim of seeing Belfast bombings came under scrutiny as well. O’Reilly was in Northern Ireland in 1984 researching a book about the Troubles, the *Washington Post* [reported in February](#). At the time, he was working for a Boston TV station, WCVB, but there is no evidence O’Reilly did any original reporting for any outlet while on the scene. Nevertheless, after an interview with O’Reilly in 2007, the *Irish Voice* was left with the false impression that “one of his stints as a TV reporter had him covering the strife in Northern Ireland.”

The alleged book was never published, the *Post* [reported](#).

As an Irish-American who often boasted about his heritage (“I’m one hundred percent Irish, which is very unusual,” he is quoted saying in the biography *The Man Who Would Not Shut Up*), the Troubles no doubt tugged at him. More than [3,600 people were killed](#) and more than 50,000 were injured during the Northern Ireland strife from the late sixties until a peace agreement was reached in 1998 between unionist Protestants who wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom, and nationalists Catholics who wanted to become part of the Republic of Ireland.

By 1969, the situation was so grave that [British troops were sent to “restore law and order.”](#) Three years later Northern Ireland had deteriorated to the point where [the British government decided to suspend Northern Ireland’s parliament and imposed direct rule from London.](#)

By 1984, the year of O’Reilly’s visit, there were still ample opportunities for reporters [to document bloodshed](#):

*[February 21](#): Two Irish Republican Army (IRA) volunteers and a British soldier were killed during a shootout in [Dunloy](#), County Antrim.

*[March 14](#): Irish Republican leader Gerry Adams was shot and wounded as he travelled by car through Belfast.

*[May 18](#): Three British soldiers were killed by an IRA bomb in Enniskillen. Two Northern Ireland officers were killed by an IRA landmine near Camlough.

*[October 12](#): The IRA carried out a bomb attack on the Grand Hotel in [Brighton](#), which was hosting a Conservative Party Conference. Five people, including Anthony Berry, a member of Parliament, were killed. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was in the hotel at the time of the blast, but escaped injury.

What's curious is that in his 2001 book, *No Spin Zone*, O'Reilly made no mention of his "war" reporting in Northern Ireland. His 2010 memoir, *A Bold Fresh Piece of Humanity*, just briefly referenced him "going to Northern Ireland at the height of the troubles," but gives no other details. And in the 2007 O'Reilly [biography](#) by Marvin Kitman, which documented the host's career in close detail, there was also no mention of O'Reilly's wartime reporting from Northern Ireland. (Kitman confirmed to *Media Matters* that O'Reilly never mentioned his work in Northern Ireland during their 29 interviews.)

Yet in 2004, O'Reilly announced he had witnessed bloodshed while covering urban warfare in Northern Ireland. During an episode of his *Radio Factor* show, he claimed he had been "in the middle of a firefight" in the Divis Flats in Ireland, calling it a "war zone." And as the *Post* pointed out, in 2013, O'Reilly wrote in

Keep It Pithy, “I’ve seen ... Irish terrorists kill and maim their fellow citizens in Belfast with bombs.”

The truth? The truth is O’Reilly saw no violence in Northern Ireland as a reporter in 1984. He didn’t cover “combat” there. When O’Reilly was [asked](#) point blank by conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt in February 2015 whether he was “in fear of physical harm” in Northern Ireland, O’Reilly responded simply, “no.”

But O’Reilly did see photographs. Just like with his thin, not-to-be-believed El Salvador clarification, Fox News [explained](#) O’Reilly “was not an eyewitness to any bombings or injuries in Northern Ireland. Instead, he was shown photos of bombings by Protestant police officers.” And *that’s* what he meant when he said, “I’ve seen ... Irish terrorists kill and maim their fellow citizens in Belfast with bombs.”

Combat reporting via Kodak.

Fast forward eight years to when O’Reilly’s hosting *Inside Edition*. At least then, when he saw the immediate after effects of the Los Angeles riots, he saw them in-person and didn’t base his observations on photographs. So that’s progress.

The problem? He again exaggerated the danger he was in and puffed up his broadcast resume by claiming he put his life at risk to tell the deadly story of the L.A. uprising.

He didn’t. What he did do was show up on the scene in a limousine and bark “Do you know who I am?” to locals.

In a 2006 [interview](#), O’Reilly stressed that while anchoring *Inside Edition* from still-smoldering Los Angeles in the spring of 1992, his life was in danger. “They were throwing bricks and stones at us. Concrete was raining down on us. The cops saved our butts that

time,” he recalled. Then during the February 20, 2015, interview with conservative radio host Hewitt, O'Reilly [claimed](#) that during the riots, “We were attacked, we were attacked by protesters, where bricks were thrown at us.”

So, concrete was raining down on O'Reilly and his *Inside Edition* crew. Except that it wasn't, according to six members of O'Reilly's crew, including reporter Rick Kirkham. “Oh my god. That is a completely fictitious story,” Kirkham [told](#) the *Guardian*. “Nothing ever rained down on us.” Former crew member Theresa McKeown added, “There was no concrete. There was a single brick.”

Kirkman insisted, “It didn't happen. If it did, how come none of the rest of us remember it?”

What did happen, according to O'Reilly's former colleagues, was that the crew and O'Reilly were confronted by a single angry man while filming near the intersection of Fairfax Avenue and Pico Boulevard. The man, who was still trying to extinguish fires from the riots that had erupted after white officers were acquitted of beating motorist Rodney King, became upset “by O'Reilly behaving disrespectfully after arriving at the smoking remains of his neighborhood in a limousine, whose driver at one point began polishing the vehicle,” reported the *Guardian*. “O'Reilly is said to have shouted at the man and asked him: ‘Don't you know who I am?’”

McKeown said O'Reilly's obnoxious behavior would have upset her, too, if she were a local. “There didn't seem to be a sensitivity for what these people were going through. It was more ‘I'm here to do my show’.” Added sound man Bob McCall: “I don't have much respect for Bill, having worked for him during that time. He was a real jackass.”

The angry Los Angeles resident threw something at the crew. “It was one person with one rock,” recalled McCall. “Nobody was hit.” Heated words were exchanged but a producer, a foot shorter than O’Reilly, was easily able to hold him back from any confrontation, McCall said. “It was a lot more show than anything else on Bill’s part.”

Pressed about the contradiction between O’Reilly’s harrowing recollections of covering the L.A. riots and the far tamer memories of his colleagues, Fox News refused to answer any specific questions from the *Guardian*. Instead, Fox stood by its previous statement that O’Reilly had become the target of “an orchestrated campaign by far left advocates.”

But many of the people calling out O’Reilly for his lies and fabrications didn’t see it that way.

“I am outraged by the McCarthy-like smear campaign Fox News is using to try to save its bloviator from oblivion by suggesting that anyone, anyone who corrects the record regarding O’Reilly is part of some leftwing conspiracy that’s out to get him,” former CBS News reporter Charlie Krause [told](#) *Media Matters*. “There is no conspiracy, leftwing or otherwise, that I am part of or aware of.”

Indeed, here’s a list of the people who worked with O’Reilly, or who worked on the same stories as him and the outlets for which they came into contact with O’Reilly. All of them stepped forward to contradict his claims of life-risking work in combat zones:

Bonnie Strauss, *Inside Edition*

Tony Cox, *Inside Edition*

Rick Kirkham, *Inside Edition*

Theresa McKeown, *Inside Edition*

Bob McCall, *Inside Edition*

Neil Antin, *Inside Edition*

Edward Epstein, former investigative reporter
Jefferson Morley, JFKfacts.org and former *Washington Post*
reporter
Tracy Rowlett, WFAA-TV
Byron Harris, WFAA-TV
[Manny Alvarez](#), CBS News
[Jim Forrest](#), CBS News
[Jim Clancy](#), CNN reporter
[Charles Gomez](#), CBS News
[George Lewis](#), NBC News
[Charles Krause](#), CBS News
Eric Engberg, CBS News
Susan Meiselas, combat photographer
[Pat Marrin](#), *National Catholic Reporter*
[Ignacio Medrano-Carbo](#), CBS News

That's at least 20 journalism professionals. If this has been part of a vast left-wing conspiracy to get Bill O'Reilly, it's been the most brilliantly executed one in progressive political history. (Hint: It's not.)

Instead, it represents people of conscience declaring that Bill O'Reilly, the face of Fox News, appears to be a congenital liar about his past and about his alleged acts of bravery.

Chapter Six

The Legend of Bill O'Reilly

In the house of mirrors that is Fox News, where facts are fungible and contradictions are professionally ignored, both Bill O'Reilly's chronic fabrications and his documented desire to reinvent his past through fantastic retellings were portrayed not as a humiliation but as a success. Unlike a traditional news outlet that would have been horrified when its most famous player was caught concocting lies about himself, Fox in the end not only didn't seem to mind the dishonesty, it treated the controversy as a victory.

For good measure, O'Reilly then [lied](#) about how the media storm had boosted his ratings.

Ignoring the recent ethical blueprint set down by under-siege news outlets such as NBC News (for Brian Williams' tall tales), CBS News (its *60 Minutes* Benghazi debacle) and *Rolling Stone* (the University of Virginia rape case), Fox instead hunkered down and allowed O'Reilly to mount his own public and increasingly erratic defense that was built around more obfuscation and [name-calling](#).

“In a way, it's impossible to win a debate with O'Reilly because he is not bound by reality,” [noted](#) David Corn after the Fox host erupted in response to *Mother Jones*' report.

And internally that's how Fox News avoids the shame of being fact-checked: Its inhabitants don't really acknowledge the world outside their bubble. Because when observers catch them fabricating and misinforming, Fox insiders don't deal with the facts in play. Instead, they announce partisan, liberal foes are attacking and that conservative targets must be defended at all costs. (i.e. Attacks on Bill O'Reilly are really attacks on his viewers!) And that's why Fox contributor Allen West actually [told](#) the *Washington Post* that the fabrication allegations against O'Reilly had been "debunked."

But misinformation matters. Lying matters. Professional fakery matters. If you're going to host a Fox "news" program and brag about how it's a "no spin zone," lying about your past ought to be disqualifying. Instead, O'Reilly and Fox News fell back into the preferred conservative mode of playing the victim and treating factual disputes as battles in the larger cultural war. (Imagine if O'Reilly had simply come clean about his Falklands War exaggeration; the entire affair would've been a one-day story because it's unlikely reporters would have further probed into his past.)

For O'Reilly and his loyal Fox viewers, everything is viewed through a partisan prism and *every* criticism of Fox is deemed unworthy. Eric Burns, who for years hosted Fox's weekly media news program, likened the increasingly unhealthy relationship to a cult.

"I'm saying that the people who watch Fox News are cultish," Burns told CNN as the O'Reilly story unfolded. "The extreme right -- they never had their own television station. When they got one, their appreciation, their audience loyalty -- and I know what the audience loyalty was like when I was there -- their audience loyalty soared. And so O'Reilly, as the head of the cult, is not held

to the same standards as Brian Williams, who was part of the media culture, the larger culture.”

Indeed, there were no hints of unrest among O’Reilly’s viewers as fabrication after fabrication tumbled out. Instead, his fans seemed to passively accept O’Reilly’s black-is-white defense. And for them, he’s still untouchable.

The talker isn’t untouchable in the sense that his mistakes don’t stick to him and he gets away with everything. He’s untouchable in the sense that he doesn’t acknowledge reality and simply pretends that when he hits into a double play he crushed a double to the wall. And Fox viewers play along. It’s the same reason why [research has confirmed](#) Fox viewers are more overwhelmingly misinformed about health care reform proposals and less likely to accept scientists’ views on global warming, and it’s why Fox News was documented as a major source of misinformation during the 2010 election.

It’s misinformation as a lifestyle. It’s complete submission in the name of partisan warfare. And O’Reilly leads the charge into the fact-free oblivion. Yes, after being documented as a committed fabulist for weeks in the press, O’Reilly soon appeared on Fox News and complained that nobody tells the truth anymore: “Anything goes. No accountability. We all know that. That situation has a chilling effect on democracy because falsehoods can become truth in weak minds. And there are plenty of those. So here’s the truth. The truth really doesn’t matter anymore, does it?”

The truth does matter. It matters that Fox News’ most famous host is a chronic fabricator. Remember, Fox [brags](#) that it’s the most trusted name in “news,” not in entertainment.

“He’s popular because of his point of view. But a lot of people listen to him,” noted Jefferson Morley, who outed O’Reilly’s

JFK investigation fabrication. “And a lot of people take what he's saying on faith.”

CNN’s Brian Stelter, who covered the O’Reilly story extensively, agreed: “We have to apply the same critical thinking skills we apply to everything else to Bill O’Reilly. You can't watch O’Reilly's show and just turn off your brain and then turn it back on when every other show is on. We have to have critical thinking skills that are applied equally across the board.”

Yet too many journalists gave Fox and O’Reilly a pass on his stunning trail of lies. Instead, the media conventional wisdom went like this: O’Reilly just an info entertainer who isn't going to be fired by Fox News for his transgressions, so what’s the big deal?

Even on his worst day, Bill O’Reilly doesn’t roam the halls of Fox News viewing himself as a mere “entertainer.” He sees himself as one of the most powerful men in television news. (And on really good days, the second most powerful man in all of America.) As [I explained](#) when the firestorm first unfolded, when he sits down across from the President of the United States for [an interview](#) right before the Super Bowl, O’Reilly certainly doesn't look like an ‘entertainer.’ He looks like the face of Fox News, the most highly rated cable news channel in America.

Meanwhile, the conventional wisdom wonders: if O’Reilly's standing is secure and he's going to turn the allegations around and use them for political gain, do the confirmed fabrications even matter? And since Fox News relishes bare-knuckle fights, aren't Fox and O’Reilly the [real winners](#)?

“The media controversy is one that plays to his and Fox News’ inherent strengths,” [announced](#) the *Columbia Journalism Review*. [Added](#) the Daily Beast, “It doesn't matter what accusations are leveled at the veteran Fox News host, whatever the new

evidence he will shout it down louder than ever.” (i.e. This guy's bulletproof) Plus his ratings spiked and he thrives on a good partisan brawl. So it was really a win-win-win for O'Reilly.

Sisyphus liberals thwarted again.

But if the controversy had been such a home run for Fox and friends, why did the rest of the Fox family remain largely silent on the subject? If it represented a win, why didn't colleagues help O'Reilly circle the bases on the air while taunting the “liberal” media?

Here are three possible reasons why. One, Fox hosts and guests were told by management not to discuss the topic. Two, O'Reilly's not popular with colleagues and they weren't interested in defending him. Or three, they realized his chronic fabrications would harm them if they defended him on-air and then more revelations tumbled out.

O'Reilly being disliked by his co-workers cannot be overlooked. It's been a hallmark of his broadcasting career. He was a “pompous jerk,” [recalled](#) Rory O'Connor, who went to high school with O'Reilly and then worked with him at Channel 5 in Boston. O'Connor told *Boston* magazine that O'Reilly “was despised in the newsroom -- but he didn't care.”

“He desperately annoyed people, including the anchor people,” [agreed](#) Emily Rooney, who was the assistant news director at WFAA-TV in Dallas during O'Reilly's time there. “He was just unabashed about saying things like: ‘I should really be the anchor here. No one's stronger than me.’”

Even Roger Ailes, the Fox News architect who turned O'Reilly into a cable news star, noted the [dark side in 2012](#): “Bill, you're authentic. You are an authentic prick. It's just not on the air. Like,

you're a prick to your staff, you're a prick to management. You're a prick to your family. You're authentic. You're actually a prick."

Added Marvin Kitman, who interviewed O'Reilly more than two dozen times for the biography he wrote about the broadcaster, "He's a pretty lousy human being."

O'Reilly's also a bully.

He [threatened](#) to turn over the personal information of a radio caller to "Fox security" because the caller had broken some sort of rule by mentioning the name of O'Reilly's other professional nemesis, Keith Olbermann, on the air. The host warned that the caller could expect "a little visit" from Fox security, whatever that means.

And when the *New York Times* called him for a comment about the Falklands War fabrications, O'Reilly [warned](#) its reporter that if he didn't like the article, "I am coming after you with everything I have." He added, "You can take it as a threat." The editors-in chief of *Mother Jones* issued a public letter calling on O'Reilly to apologize after he suggested their reporter should be "in the kill zone." O'Reilly explained that he was simply using a "slang expression."

Issuing hollow threats instead of admitting obvious mistakes. That nicely captures the O'Reilly model. And it's a long way from his days as an aspiring network news player. O'Reilly got his big chance, twice, with CBS and then with ABC. But he didn't make the grade.

Since then he's set out to reinvent his past. He's set out to glorify his gumshoe reporting days, perhaps in a vain attempt to convince himself he truly deserved to make it in the big leagues. After all, he risked it all during the Falklands War in a "combat zone." He

chased down a JFK investigation scoop and heard the gunshot that killed a key witness. He watched as life was brutally snuffed out of those four American churchwomen in El Salvador. He nearly got killed by bricks while covering the bloody L.A. riots. And he witnessed first-hand the trauma of an urban civil war in Northern Ireland.

That's the resume Bill O'Reilly's been touting for years as the face of Fox News. It's a resume he concocted out of thin air. And it's the resume he stands by in the face of a prolonged public debunking, the type of which is likely unequalled in broadcast news. But inside the Fox bubble, O'Reilly remains king because his loyal subjects don't care that he's a congenital liar. Outside the bubble is a different story though, and any dreams O'Reilly might have had of being viewed as a distinguished news voice are now dashed.

“He’s an ego maniac,” biographer Kitman told *Media Matters*. “He seem to be kind of a pathological guy. You’d have to be a psychiatrist to write about him now.”