May 29, 2006

David Westin, President ABC News
Anne Sweeney, President ABC Network
7 West 66th Street
New York, New York 10023

Dear Mr. Westin and Ms. Sweeney:

On behalf of millions of members and supporters across the country, we protest the abrupt removal of the outstanding journalist Elizabeth Vargas as co-anchor of ABC-TV's "World News Tonight." In her five months in that position, she has demonstrated the kind of integrity and professionalism you ought to be rewarding with promotions and accolades as she prepares for her maternity leave. Instead, this clear demotion signals a dispiriting return to the days of discrimination against women that we thought were behind us.

At 43, Vargas has been a role model and inspiration to a generation of girls and women, especially those of Hispanic descent, as well as to many women journalists who are trying to balance family and career in a demanding profession. Her demotion is not only a violation of the spirit of the Family and Medical Leave Act, it is what Carol Rivers, a Boston University professor of journalism, described as "a message to all women taking maternity leave that you missed your shot." We are not persuaded differently by Vargas' graceful parting statement that she is stepping down voluntarily in order to spend more time with her family. We ask you, as executives of ABC News, why no one ever asks men how they manage to balance work and family considerations? We also understand from news reports that Diane Sawyer was passed over for consideration as an anchor.

With this action and your parallel decision to terminate the series "Commander-In-Chief," in which Geena Davis portrayed America's first woman president, you have now managed to eliminate two of the country's most visible women role models and high achievers from your television lineup. We urge you to reverse this appalling trend in general and, in particular to put Elizabeth Vargas or Diane Sawyer in their rightful place on "World News Tonight." Surely her talent and ability will enable you to come up with a schedule and work arrangements that will allow Elizabeth Vargas to continue as both a dedicated mother and a dedicated journalist.

We believe Elizabeth Vargas or Diane Sawyer would still make a terrific anchor or part of a co-anchor team, and think others in the evening news audience would agree.

Over the past few years, academic colleagues have monitored nightly news shows and released a scorecard of sorts on the number of stories filed by male and female correspondents. We plan to work with these researchers and encourage viewers, both women and men, to vote with their television dials.

Sincerely,

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