

# If It's Sunday...

2004. Acrylic on canvas, 36x48"

by  
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Meet The Press began airing on television on November 6, 1947. The program was an opportunity for members of the national press to ask questions of social and political leaders in a formal, professional question and answer setting. In 1984, Tim Russert, a northeastern, urban Catholic, went to work for NBC News, having spent his prior career as a political operative for United States Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and later for Governor Cuomo of New York. Russert got the NBC News job through friends of Moynihan. At the time, he was told that the pace of managing news was similar to issues he dealt with in Washington. NBC hired him for a management position. As an executive, with no prior management or journalism experience, he spent four years learning the business.<sup>1</sup> Russert is a graduate of the Catholic college, John Carroll University, as well as a graduate of Cleveland-Marshall law school, though he has never practiced law.<sup>2</sup>

In 1991, NBC News president, Larry Grossman, asked Russert to compile a list of new hosts, because the host at the time, Garrick Utley, was leaving the program. Needless to say, Russert became host.<sup>3</sup>

Meet the Press with Russert would no longer be about asking the tough questions of political and social leaders in the news. Instead, it became political entertainment, "a thoughtful exchange of ideas."<sup>4</sup> Russert would host a farcical deposition setting - a chance for him to play lawyer - along the same line that he was playing journalist. It would create the impression of tough questioning, with the gimmick of showing on the screen quotes by or about guests. A gimmick that would get old, tired, and way over-played. It wasn't long before guests knew what to expect, the result being, "yeah, so what, been there, heard that." Next question.

The fact of the matter is Russert's questions are soft, passive, and often formed for the benefit of the guest to give a formatted answer; usually the same answer they've given during the previous week. Furthermore, it's no longer about seeking answers and solutions to the serious issues facing the American people. Today, it's about power and protecting the people in power.

Russert is the moderator for the political wing of the corporation; the face of General Electric and NBC. As host of the open mic for powerful Washington insiders, he guides them through their talking points, never to offend or aggressively question. It is corporate owned and controlled "news" programming with someone playing the role of a "journalist."

One of the best examples - to illustrate the true character of Russert, and the petty and manipulative manner in which he operates - was the Howard Dean interview on February 1, 2004. The former Vermont Governor - the outsider in the Democratic primary - had been chipping away at his opponents. At one point, Russert claimed that if Dean kept that up he would hurt the Democratic Party because the Republicans would play those attacks back, over and over, to use against the Democratic candidate. Mr. Dean, however, was quick to point out that no one ever said that to his opponents when they were attacking him.<sup>5</sup>

That simple point drilled to the very core of Russert's mentality. Did Tim Russert and NBC News already decide that Dean was not going to be the Democratic candidate? Did they direct and edit their news coverage to fit their own conclusion? More than likely, yes.

Another interesting example was when Russert put up a quote about Dean. It was a letter to the editor from the Des Moines Register, by a man named Jim Bootz from Chaska, Minnesota. The letter stated, "Now I know how Howard Dean gets his exercise while he's on the campaign trail. He drops to his knees to beg 'Washington insiders' to endorse him, and then jumps up to insult them. I'm guessing he does about 20 repetitions of that a day."<sup>6</sup> Russert read the quote, and acted like it was some average guy, some "Big Russ" writing to the Iowa newspaper, one letter of 53 letters to the editor that day. It turned out, Jim Bootz was the Minnesota State Director for another candidate in the primary.<sup>7</sup> Russert never mentioned that part of the story. Perhaps only real journalists provide full disclosure.

Then there was Russert's performance on election night 2000, more of a fraternity election or cattle auction than professional journalism. The use of a dry-erase board as entertainment prop was the lowest point of broadcast journalism; the defining act which would confirm the fact that news and democratic elections had become broadcast entertainment - controlled and packaged by dominating multinational corporations - rather than a public service. Russert's part of the performance was jester for the news personalities to turn to between acts. And where was Jack Welch, the CEO of General Electric, that night? Was he in the studio instructing the news personalities to call the election for Bush? Did it matter if he was in the studio? Probably not because, either way, the democratic electoral process had already been denigrated to the level of a game show.

And what about that Meet The Press roundtable of journalists - the ones forbidden to ask questions of the main guests? The majority are male, all are white, and all politically conservative or center-right. Perhaps, it's fair to say that Tim Russert is only comfortable with people like himself. However, the exception would be the soap opera, dysfunctional political couple of Carville and Matalin - now there's advertisement for mental health medication.

Furthermore, the same journalists are on week after week, a parade of old white guys reminiscing in political nostalgia - David Broder, William Safire, Robert Novak. Though, there is the occasional woman like Gloria Borger, Robin Wright, or Doris Kearns Goodwin. Maybe they count as minorities in Tim Russert's world. Overall, it's giddy cocktail party narcissism; the well-off name-dropping to one another.

Perhaps that's why America ended up in a bloody, unnecessary, unending war; too much chatty conversation had replaced genuine insight and serious questioning. After all, the underlying theme of this out-dated "exchange of ideas" can be summed up as: the status quo is good. Everything is fine in their America, no one is right and no one is wrong. The powerful remain in power, and the rest of America and the world, well, they just have to live with the way things are because the elite insiders and the people in power like it that way.

So, if it's Sunday...how many more people are dead in Iraq?

### Notes

1. *In the Hot Seat*, washingtonpost.com, May 23, 2004, by Howard Kurtz
2. *Ibid.*; *Tim Russert*, msnbc.msn.com, April 21, 2004, NBC News
3. *In the Hot Seat*, washingtonpost.com, May 23, 2004, by Howard Kurtz
4. *About Meet the Press*, msnbc.msn.com, December 8, 2003, NBC News
5. Meet the Press transcript, February 1, 2004, msnbc.msn.com
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Media Notes Extra*, washingtonpost.com, February 2, 2004, by Howard Kurtz