

What Was Their Role?

2005. Acrylic on canvas 30x48”

by
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*“We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders,
to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds.”*

Walter Cronkite, February 27, 1968¹

The role of newscaster has been part of the American television landscape since the late 1940s. In the early years it was a short broadcast report of headline news on the three major television networks, CBS, ABC, and NBC. Over the decades there have been a collection of well known names: Edward R. Murrow, Eric Sevareid, John Cameron Swayze, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, John Chancellor and the legendary Walter Cronkite.

Cronkite, known as ‘the most trusted man in America’² rose to the status of news icon, and the measure of what Americans came to know as the network news anchor, for the very reason that he changed the course of history when he questioned the policy and progress of America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. President Lyndon Johnson, in February 1968, “reputedly turned to his press secretary, saying, ‘If I’ve lost Walter, I’ve lost Mr. Average Citizen.’”³

By the early 1980s, the news anchor landscape would change. In 1982, Walter Cronkite left the CBS Evening News. Dan Rather, a white Southerner and ambitious CBS reporter, maneuvered his way into the anchor position.

On NBC, John Chancellor left the anchor chair to be replaced by Tom Brokaw, a white, boyish, “all-American” looking, lightweight reporter who had moved from local television news to the Today Show, and finally to the anchor chair of NBC Nightly News in 1983.

At ABC, Peter Jennings, a Canadian, who had begun his career in Canadian radio and television, and had spent time as a reporter for ABC News in different parts of the world, was chosen to anchor World News Tonight. Another white, boyish-looking, “all-American” type of guy to compete against NBC’s Brokaw.

Rather, Brokaw and Jennings would set the stage for the decline in broadcast journalism and usher in the news of the 21st century by cheer-leading war, reporting tabloid scandals, catering to the rich and powerful, and in the process, become multi-millionaire “yes-men” for the corporations that would own them.

Brokaw would go even one better and become an author peddling the World War II generation as the Greatest Generation. However, it’s interesting to note that Brokaw started selling war as a requirement for being a “Greatest Generation”, when his own reputation was tarnished after publicly lynching Richard Jewel as being the Atlanta Olympic Games bomber in 1996. NBC and Brokaw eventually settled out of court with Jewel.

For Brokaw, the Greatest Generation became a commodity, a marketing gimmick to sell the NBC brand. It became overkill selling, because everywhere Brokaw went, the topic had to be associated or tied in with the Greatest Generation.

What was the end product of that saturation campaign? That war made a generation great? Was that what the present generation took away from Brokaw’s self-promotion and product marketing? How many young people bought into that product, and eventually believed the false premise that Iraq was going to be like World War II?

From Ground Zero in New York to Baghdad in Iraq, Brokaw was tying in The Greatest Generation. Perhaps Brokaw was insecure about his own generation, his own achievements, his position as a corporate product, selling stories that would sell to advertisers, who in turn wanted to sell toiletries, junk food, laxatives, deodorant, and cars all during his fifteen minutes of headline news that was packaged like melodrama.

Did Brokaw allow the Bush administration to highjack the idea of the Greatest Generation to sell the Iraq War as another World War II? Did Brokaw question that absurd comparison, or was it just another opportunity to continue selling product?

Was it Brokaw's "patriotic duty" to sell the greatness of war and sacrifice? An easy assignment for a millionaire sitting comfortably in a studio imagining past "war heroes" while he peddled sacrifice to others who would die in the process.

Even when Brokaw sat at his anchor desk, with a group of former generals, he appeared preoccupied with war stories and military jargon, instead of aggressively questioning the gung-ho generals as to why it was necessary to go to war with a country that was no threat to the United States. Perhaps, Brokaw actually believed all the hype and wanted to be part of the group, blinded by camaraderie. War was the product of the moment – everyone in his circle would benefit from it. Hype, righteousness, patriotism, and greatness were at full throttle. Reporters were with the troops. It would once again be Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, The Longest Day, A Bridge Too Far, all live and heroic. It wasn't war, but liberation! Flowers and kisses would be thrown to American soldiers. The ratings would be spectacular! How could anyone question it?

Former NBC News correspondent, Tom Fenton, in his new book, *Bad News: The Decline of Reporting, The Business of News, and The Danger to Us All*, interviews the three network anchors and poses the question of whether million dollar anchor salaries take resources away from the coverage of foreign news.

When Mr. Fenton asked Tom Brokaw about the anchor's salary, Brokaw replied, "I'm not going to tell you. I get paid a lot."⁴

Fenton then asked him if that meant that there were fewer news bureaus for foreign reporting, because so much money was going to multimillion dollar anchor salaries. Brokaw cynically said, "If I got paid, less, they'd bank it. They wouldn't spend it. They'd bank it, or they would spend it on other corporate enterprises." He went on to say, "I don't know what the number is, but they seem to believe by paying me they get a fair return on their investment. And that's the way business operates. But if they paid me a third or a half, they wouldn't take that other half and say, Oh we are going to spend that money on covering the madrassas of Pakistan, or whatever."⁵

Over at CBS, Dan Rather, in preparation for war, appeared more preoccupied with creating new country bumpkin sayings and anecdotes, instead of questioning all the false information spewing out of the Bush administration about Iraq. But then Dan always did like being a caricature when he had non-stop air time.

Rather went so far as to say, "Look, I'm an American. I never tried to kid anybody that I'm some internationalist or something. And when my country is at war, I want my country to win, whatever the definition of 'win' may be. Now, I can't and don't argue that that is coverage without a prejudice. About that I am prejudiced."⁶

So much for the press being neutral in matters of war and peace and reporting accurately for the American people.

When Mr. Fenton asked Rather why CBS had so little foreign news coverage, Dan is quoted as saying, "Part of the responsibility in a job such as I have is to wage the good fight without fear or favor. And I think we can all be faulted for not fighting hard enough, not taking enough risks to fight. Because who knows if we did, what the results would be?"⁷

Perhaps the result would have been Americans having a more informed idea of what goes on in the world. But hey, Dan wasn't about to make waves and lose his celebrity status and multimillion dollar pay check. And making waves and questioning decisions was no longer in style. Responsibility to the public Rather said, was "gone out of fashion...you get tagged as yesterday's man or woman."⁸

When Rather was asked about his salary, he said, "I am not going to tell you." However, he did say, "I have no complaints whatsoever."⁹

ABC recently began selling Jennings as *Trust is Earned*, as if that matters. If that were accurate, Jennings would not have been so quick to support and cheer-lead the war. If anything, that should earn him even less trust with the American people. But then, the anchors are not responsible for the advertising gimmick. They're just the product.

When Peter Jennings was asked about his salary, he blamed unions. He said, "Look, the big corporations have chosen how they are going to spend their money. They have chosen how much money they are going to give to the news division. We could indeed operate more efficiently. Our news divisions are burdened to some extent by their relationships with their unions. If we were a non-union shop there would be more money."¹⁰ Did he mean there would be more money if the people below him were paid less, received fewer benefits and had no employment protection?

Jennings went on to say that he makes "so much money, I could afford to give them a million dollars back, but I am not sure we would hire another correspondent or two more correspondents, or five more correspondents."¹¹ "Money" he said, "has become – as it has to do with anything in public consumption – it has become a measure of authority and power. And that quite frankly is the way I think it should be regarded."¹²

Then, as a way to dodge that responsibility, and perhaps a way to justify his millions and his inaction to make change, Jennings said: "The one legitimate thing to ask the anchor people, it seems to me, is how much power do we really have – and how much power do we exercise." He claims that anchors should not just complain publicly about the corporate business decisions, but that, "[t]he people we should be speaking to are our bosses."¹³

It's a pretty safe bet that never happened, but it's a nice excuse. How could that ever be verified?

Though, one thing was verifiable: the news got worse, their salaries skyrocketed, and the anchors stayed longer. Therefore, it seems, the only discussion the anchors were having with their bosses, was what would the anchors get in return for going along with the corporate business decisions?

Their *legacy* will be that they went along with the President's propaganda machine, and repeated the false information without question or skepticism.

What's even more interesting about Peter Jennings in that regard was the fact that, according to ABC's biography of him, he established the first "American television news bureau in the Arab world when he served as ABC News' bureau chief in Beirut, Lebanon" for seven years. Yet when the time came to apply his "expertise", he just nodded and went along with the Bush administration.

How did it come to be that these three men, at their age and status, were still afraid of the corporate bosses of CBS, NBC and ABC? Were they not supposed to be leaders, national icons, men of conviction and integrity? Were they not members of the Fourth Estate questioning the power structure on behalf of the people?

Perhaps that was just all product marketing, and the truth of the matter was, the anchors were nothing more than corporate employees, playing a role – hood ornaments rather than icons. Men who rationalized their exorbitant salaries, and went along with what the

corporate bosses at General Electric, Viacom, and Disney wanted from their celebrity personalities.

Rather, Brokaw, and Jennings were followers, not leaders. The “trust” and “experience” they peddle was an illusion, a logo, a marketing slogan. They towed the corporate line and ended their careers selling the corrupt government's case for war, without questioning it. They became cheerleaders caught up in nostalgic, patriotic nationalism.

They could have had a more positive impact on the lives of people, on the direction of this country, if they had taken a stand years ago, threatened resignation, went public with their complaints, used their “stature” to override the bean counting, bad bosses that fertilized the roots of bad journalism. They could have shown real leadership. They could have been true icons, respected as serious journalists.

Instead, they went along with everything, molded themselves as celebrities and corporate products. They didn't question power, they catered to it.

Notes

1. Clark Dougan, Stephen Weiss and the editors of Boston Publishing Company, *The Vietnam Experience, Nineteen Sixty-Eight*, (Boston Publishing Company, 1983), p. 70.
2. Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War, Vietnam: 1945-1975*, (Avon Books, 1981), p. 199.
3. Ibid.
4. Tom Fenton, *Bad News: The Decline of Reporting, The Business of News, and The Danger to Us All*, (Regan Books, 2005), p. 155.
5. Ibid.
6. *Rather's Retirement and "Liberal Bias"*, Media Advisory (3/2/05), Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), <http://www.fair.org>.
7. Fenton, *Bad News*, p. 150.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid, p. 157.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 158.
13. Ibid., p. 159.