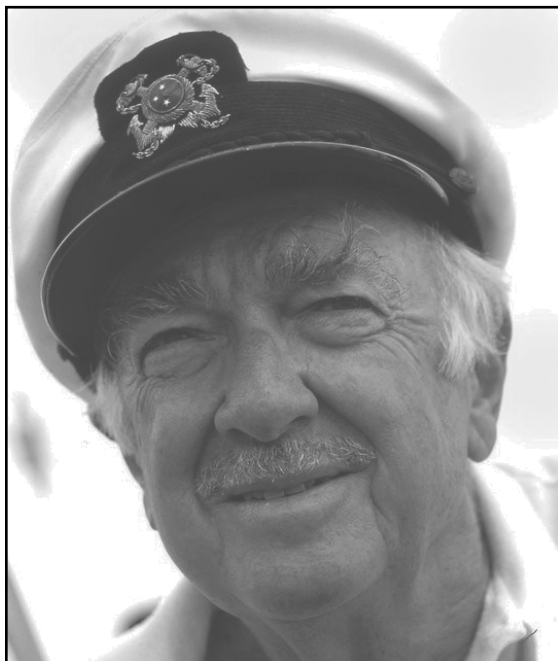

WALTER LELAND CRONKITE, JR.



PETER SIMON

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ANCHORMAN: *The fastest runner on a relay team.* The term was first used to describe Walter Cronkite's role in CBS' political convention coverage—when the PR department asked news producer Sig Mickelson, “What's Walter going to do?” He replied, “He is going to anchor for us.”

AND THAT'S THE WAY IT IS

If your perception of Walter Cronkite is an avuncular fellow with a pencil thin mustache and a sonorous speaking cadence of 120 words per minute (he slowed down to not lose any viewers), you are missing quite a story. The real life of Walter Cronkite recalls Winston Churchill's resolute formula for victory: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.”

Toil and sweat were virtually all Cronkite *could* offer as he clawed his way up the ladder from a small-time radio station in Kansas City to the United Press International (UPI), the most dynamic posting in World War II for an ambitious young journalist. As for tears, there isn't an American old enough to watch television in 1963 who doesn't recall a loss of composure. If glider flying during a time of war was anything like Cronkite described, there was blood, too. When an interviewer asked about his “jump” with the 101st Airborne, Cronkite set the facts straight, a habit that would follow him throughout his life:

No, I glided in—a far worse way to go. I almost refused the assignment when I got up to the 101st and they told me I was going by glider instead of parachute. I just about turned around and went home. I'd seen what happened to the gliders in Normandy, and it was pretty terrible. The same thing happened in Holland.

Historian David Halberstam called Walter Cronkite “the most significant journalist of the second half of the twentieth century” in the way one might say, “George Washington was the most significant politician of the second half of the eighteenth century.” Depending on the circumstance, Cronkite could be both bigger and smaller than his reputation. “Walter Cronkite wore his mantle as the most trusted man in America exceedingly lightly. As honored as he was, he never actually believed it” as Morley Safer once said.

His dream was to anchor the *CBS Evening News*. Even the siren's song of the Vice Presidency couldn't tempt him (Frank Mankiewicz, political director of the McGovern 1972 presidential campaign, suggested Cronkite's name on the Democratic ticket. It didn't make it out of the smoke-filled room).

Cronkite was energized by the power and the glory of the anchor desk. Today, we would call him an action addict. Few were surprised when the plainsman from Missouri turned into a born power player once he held the reins. He wasted little time in remaking the broadcast in his image, as he related to Don Carleton of the Briscoe Center of the University of Texas (where Cronkite donated his personal and professional papers):

When I took over the *CBS Evening News* I wanted to be the ultimate judge of the news content. That made quite a difference to the producer Don Hewitt [later of *60 Minutes*] because he had been running the show. I wanted to work differently. I suggested the title “Managing Editor.” There were a lot of complaints from newspapers, “How dare a newsman on air call himself managing editor.”

On 16 April 1962, Cronkite sat down in the anchor chair for the first time. He tried out a new voice, giving it a bit of Broadway and raising the decibel. It got him noticed alright. Trial and error was Cronkite’s way of innovating, a practice he would repeat throughout his career. As soon as the broadcast was over, Andy Rooney (a former wartime buddy and later of *60 Minutes*) sprinted over to the booth, as Cronkite recalled:

Rooney barked: “What are you trying to sell me? You broadcast like a pitchman. You’re trying too hard. Calm down.” And it was damned good advice.

His sign off was a Cronkitism as well:

I’ve always been intrigued with “irony of fate” type news stories. They usually appeared in the newspapers. I thought I’d end a broadcast with one of those. I could use a phrase that could be . . . said with a tinge of sadness, or with a tinge of irony, or it could have a tone of sarcasm or disbelief. So I could say, “and that’s how it is” with any tone I wanted.

The backstory is vintage Cronkite. The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) aired the first scheduled news program during wartime, 1941. Then, in 1949, a 15-minute *daily* news show became a reality. The first 30-minute news program wouldn’t air until 2 September 1963 (of course, anchored by Walter Cronkite). For broadcast trivia addicts, Edward R. Murrow did host a 30-minute news special report on 9 March 1954 called *See It Now*, an expose of Senator Joseph McCarthy that led to his censure by the Senate.

Those early 15-minute broadcasts weren’t just news either. Three of those precious minutes went to commercial time. This business strategy

may have been practical, but it didn't sit well with Cronkite. He was a battle-tested UPI heavyweight. He liked to tell the whole story and was a stickler for details as his *Evening News* successor, Katie Couric, confirmed:

Seeking the truth is really important. Cronkite was an incredible stickler about getting it right. And, you know, things are done kind of fast and furiously in this day and age Walter really honed his craft, working for United Press, back in the day.

There would be no debate. If he was going to put his stamp on the *Evening News*, it had to rise to a new standard. The reality was the talented anchor barely had time to read headlines. So he came up with a sign off that lent a touch of gravitas, a counterbalance: "And that's the news. Be sure to check your local newspapers tomorrow to get all the details on the headlines we are delivering to you."

Somehow, the jury of his bosses at CBS didn't fully appreciate this closer, as Cronkite's producer and great friend of many years, Sandy Socolow, recalled:

CBS News President Richard Salant "raised hell with Cronkite," but the newscaster wasn't budging. And then Cronkite had an epiphany: In the absence of anything else, he came up with, "That's the way it is." Salant's attitude was, "We're not telling them that's the way it is. We can't do that in 15 minutes. That's not the way it is." But to Cronkite, Salant was missing the point about the need for a powerful sign off, so he persisted.

Looking back, Cronkite agreed:

Well, that was a very contrived sign off, obviously. And I'm a little embarrassed about it today. Dick Salant hated it and tried to talk me out of it. Being the stubborn Dutchman I am, I clung to it and it became so much a signature so quickly that I was not inclined to give it up. Because I think Dick Salant was right. Almost from the beginning of the *Evening News*, there was so much news to cover we never got those irony of fate stories in. As a result, we were loading the broadcast with important news and I was ending up saying, and that's the way it is. An arrogant line in a sense.

WHAT WOULD WALTER DO?

Cronkite was a dyed-in-the-wool believer in the school of journalism that looks at all sides of an issue and left little room for ego or bias. He worshiped from a catechism that preached a journalist's only duty was to get the facts and get them right. If there is a signature teachable

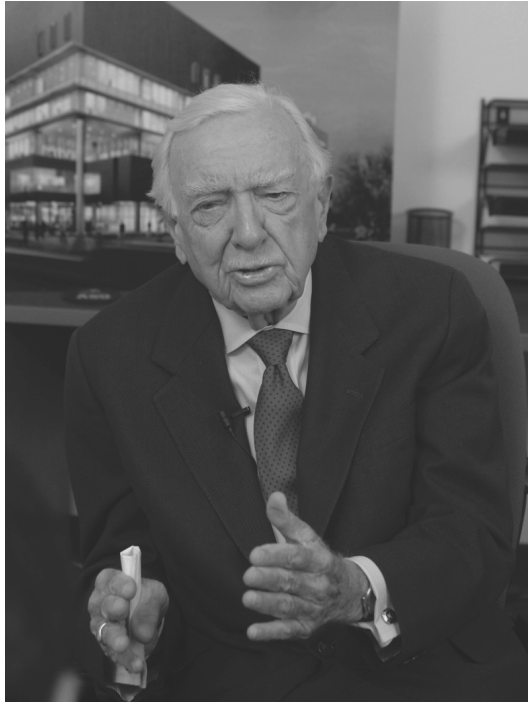


FIGURE 1. Teaching at the Cronkite School of Journalism. Photo credit: Walter Cronkite School archives.

moment in the *oeuvre* of Walter Cronkite, it is that viewers could not guess at his politics from his reporting. Although those highfalutin scruples would land him in trouble time and again, as an experienced sailor it was his way of finding true north in the newsroom, Katie Couric recalled:

Before I took on this job [anchor for the *CBS Evening News*], Walter was nice enough to take me out to dinner. He said: “I got in trouble from both sides of the aisle . . . whether liberals or conservatives. I thought I was doing something right because I would hear it from everybody.”

When an innovative journalism school with national aspirations was looking for a namesake, those same caveats made him their first and only choice. In 1984, the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication was established at Arizona State University. He would make only one stipulation. The word “journalism” would always be in the school’s title. Of course.

Visit the Cronkite School in downtown Phoenix and you’ll find Dean Christopher Callahan’s memorabilia-filled office as well as a

boutique museum devoted to Cronkite-iana. The Dean's office exhibits the usual artifacts of a modern academic leader (e.g., computers, books, papers), but on the corner of the desk, something quite out of the ordinary—Walter Cronkite's pipe. Dean Callahan explains:

Walter told me in his typical fashion to take whatever I wanted from his office and bring it back with me. Now the pipe serves as a memory trigger, prompting me, when faced with a complex matter, to do the easiest thing in the world when you're a journalist—I do it all the time, and it's largely how I run the Cronkite School, I ask myself: "What would Walter do?"

TEACHING AT THE CRONKITE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM OF ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Douglas Anderson, director of the Cronkite School from 1987–99 before becoming dean of the College of Communications at Pennsylvania State University, recalls the anchorman's annual chalkboard visits on campus:

Walter would work with students and faculty from 8 a.m. until 10 o'clock at night, with barely a half-hour lunch break. Well past his retirement as managing editor of the *CBS Evening News*, he proved his nickname, "old iron pants."

The way Cronkite earned the nickname was due to his every 4-year stint as CBS' election night anchor. Elections were broadcast nonstop from booths hung at the top of convention arenas. That was a good move because viewers saw political drama in real time, and it kept them from changing channels. Being so high up also meant an anchor would have to leave the booth for a period of time whenever taking a break. Cronkite was never going to miss being right in the middle of the action, that much was certain. So he sat there like a sentry from late afternoon through the wee hours—and anchored away.

UNCLE WALTER

He remained Uncle Walter to generations of Americans who saw him as a wise and fair man with a sailor's skill of getting them through rough seas by keeping a steady hand on the tiller and his eyes on the far horizon. —Tom Brokaw

Walter Cronkite's impeccable timing would make a Broadway thespian envious. His path from radio, to UPI, to CBS, even his retirement as a highly sought after commentator, paralleled the rise of the



FIGURE 2. Describing NASA's rocket launch. Photo credit: Retro Space Images.

media in the United States—from the early days of an advanced communications technology we now call radio, then beginning to compete with print, to the worlds of television and digital media.

Cronkite's 20-year beat captured the zeitgeist of America during the '60s and '70s. His boots were on the ground in Vietnam. He was about to become the only broadcaster to join a NASA rocket launch (until age disqualified him). He manned the anchor desk during Selma, Watts, the Chicago Democratic convention, Mayor Daley, and the SDS. He reported the country's struggles with the Kent State shootings and those infamous symbols of our first televised war—body bags (nearly 60,000). He brought perspective to an epidemic of assassinations beginning with John F. Kennedy in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, and then Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968.

In the summer of 1965, viewers learned from Cronkite that 3,438 people had been arrested for violent protests in Los Angeles, and a contagion of race riots sparked across America's cities. Anxiety was palpable and so was a sense of despair that the country would come unglued before its bicentennial. But each night, they listened to Cronkite's calm and measured tones, there was something there that reassured them.

Cronkite's reporting was also at least partially responsible for two historic counterpunches that found their target in the Office of the Presidency. President Johnson withdrew from his own reelection, and Watergate followed a few years later when President Nixon resigned rather than face impeachment.

The other memorable event of the 60's would take place above and not on the Earth. The impact of the widely admired moon landing coverage on both Walter Cronkite's career as well as the network was incalculable. It prompted *60 Minutes* correspondent Mike Wallace to

conclude, “CBS news, now firmly under the stewardship of Walter Cronkite, whose electrifying coverage of the 1969 lunar landing cinched his position as the nation’s top TV newsman.”

Who could have predicted in these harrowing times the country would come to rely so deeply on this ordinary extraordinary man? Cronkite’s nightly visage was ubiquitous to the point that we barely recall a time he wasn’t “Uncle Walter.” By the time the Gallup Poll got around to checking with its researchers, Cronkite had become “the most trusted man in America.”

CRONKITE’S WAY

Historians would have to rewrite the tragedy of the Vietnam War if not for Cronkite’s 27 February 1968, prime-time special report, *Who, What, When, Where, Why*. Cronkite was pro-war originally, or at least pro-American soldier. He reconsidered after spending time with Andy Rooney and Morley Safer in the battlefield, where he saw the Pentagon’s reports were bogus. His two chums advised him to take a definitive stand.

That was exactly what Cronkite was planning, only he was concerned about using the *CBS Evening News* as a platform for the overheated politics of the War. So, he ran it as a special report where he famously concluded Vietnam would end in a stalemate, which shocked Americans who were accustomed to hearing only positive Pentagon propaganda. Among those watching was President Lyndon B. Johnson, who sighed aloud, “If I’ve lost Walter Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.” Shortly after the broadcast, Johnson withdrew from running for re-election.

Cronkite’s interview with Anwar Sadat similarly triggered an epic, even global reaction. The Egyptian president placed his historic call to Menachem Begin during the middle of his interview with the anchorman. The inspiration for doing so was when “Ambassador Cronkite” suggested it to Sadat on the air. It led directly to Sadat’s 1977 historic visit to Israel, the most significant Middle East peace overture in recent history.

Cronkite was a reporter’s reporter who loved nothing better than to scoop the competition. He saw himself as a tireless, no-nonsense journalist albeit with an avuncular presence. So in the bare-knuckled world of television it wasn’t surprising that some honchos would see him as another TV celebrity who could be intimidated or bullied by the high and mighty. Cronkite was no one’s fool. In fact, when it came to journalistic principle, those who tested his determination did so to their everlasting regret. It didn’t matter if it was the President of the United States or his producer. At Kansas City’s KCMO radio, when Cronkite



FIGURE 3. In Vietnam (with microphone) during Battle of Hue City. Photo credit: Braestrup Collection.

first started broadcasting, he refused to announce a tragic fire because it was based on hearsay of the program director's wife:

KCMO program director: You don't have to check [if there was a fire]. My wife called and told me.

Cronkite: I do too have to check on it.

Program director: Are you calling my wife a liar?

Cronkite: I refused to go with the story, so the program director went on the air and ad-libbed a news bulletin.

Although there was no tragic fire, there would be a firing—Cronkite's, for insubordination. It wouldn't be the last time he put his job on the line for the sake of good journalism.

Even Bill Paley, the powerful founder of CBS, knew if the subject was editorial integrity, it wasn't worth risking Cronkite's wrath, even when the United States President demanded it.

Walter Cronkite's impact on Watergate deserves special mention because popular culture has immortalized the fabulous saga of the *Washington Post's* Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Without Cronkite, the story might have disappeared from the front pages:

As Don Carleton and Walter Cronkite discussed in their book, *Conversations with Cronkite*:

In late 1972, Cronkite asked his producers to do something unheard of—feature two nights of lengthy explanation on the Watergate scandal, which had been extensively covered by the *Washington Post*. But it had not yet received major national coverage and the story seemed to be losing steam.

The pressures from the Nixon administration were getting really severe on the *Washington Post*. They were to the point of giving up when . . . we brought new life to the Watergate story on October 27, 1972. The first piece we did on Watergate ran for more than 14 minutes. After Nixon's special counsel, Charles Colson called Paley to complain, Paley raised hell with Dick Salant. Only he outfoxed him but very cleverly seizing upon Paley's main complaint—devoting the entire news program on Watergate, and that saved the day. So Salant called us and demanded we shorten the next day's piece by half. But content was never mentioned. I later asked Salant, and he denied Paley had dictated the decision. Salant knew that if I knew Paley forced the decision, I would have blown my top.

These days, journalists are prone to fall in love with political leaders holding views that mirror their own (to be fair, perhaps out of the need for access rather than conviction). Cronkite understood the dangers of losing one's perspective on the anchor desk. To paraphrase Sun Tzu's famous edict, he "kept his friends close and his politicians closer."

His political trophy room had a long row of distinguished heads. He interviewed and admired Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter (who he thought was the smartest president), and Reagan, but never to the point where he couldn't back off and give them a thumping. He worked both sides of the aisle regardless of his political opinion. He even visited George Wallace at his hospital bed after the assassination attempt on the Alabama governor. Cronkite vigorously disagreed with Wallace on a number of issues, most acutely, race. He just felt it was the right thing to do. Cronkite's on-air persona was known for great theater, great reporting, and great empathy. "Great balance" would be another.

The most memorable presidential moment of Walter Cronkite's career was his announcement of the assassination and death of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. It casts a poignancy over an earlier interview with a petulant Senator Kennedy who tried to browbeat the anchorman into giving him a mulligan on his first take.



FIGURE 4. Interviewing President Kennedy. Photo credit: Walter Cronkite Memorial.

As Douglas Brinkley relates in his magnificent biography:

Cronkite had a date to interview Senator Kennedy at his Federal-style Georgetown home, a gift to his wife, Jackie. Unfortunately, Kennedy blew the interview. It was clear that he hadn't properly boned up for the program, confusing even his résumé on film. Once the camera rolled, Kennedy was all hems and haws.

While Cronkite was watching Kennedy's botched interview in the CBS truck outside the candidate's house, the CBS producer, Warren Abrams, came barging in, clearly panicked. "We've got to do the program over," Abrams said. "What's the matter with it?" a perplexed Cronkite asked. "It's all right in here. I'm looking at it."

"Well, the senator says we have to do it over,"

"Well," Cronkite fumed, "what right does he have?" Cronkite scoffed. "It's because he blew that last question. I've got to talk to him."

Cronkite stomped up the stairs of Kennedy's home to encounter a startled JFK. Kennedy saw "a fire in Walter's eyes that he didn't know he had."

Kennedy, looking straight at Cronkite said, "Tell me when you're ready [to reshoot]."

“Senator,” Cronkite replied. “I don’t think we ought to do this again.”

Kennedy retorted. “We’re going to do it.”

Overwhelmed by the unremitting tension, Cronkite tried a sly new angle. “But you know,” he told Kennedy, “we’re going to have to carry a disclaimer. We’re going to say that Nixon’s was unrehearsed but that you requested to do yours over.”

“I can live with that,” said Senator John F. Kennedy.

“All right, Senator,” Cronkite said in disbelief. “We’ll do it over. But I’ve got to tell you, I think it’s the lousiest bit of sportsmanship I ever saw in my life.”

Suddenly Kennedy turned gray with embarrassment and said, “Let it run!”

Even later in life as a retired broadcaster, Cronkite could only view politics by first making a keen comparison of intent against evidence of common sense and facts. He never set foot in a newsroom without acknowledging there were two sides, even if only one would prevail on the right side of history. In a 2002 interview with CNN’s Larry King, Cronkite (who was against the invasion of Iraq) offered his view of President George W. Bush:

I think it depends upon whether you believe in what he’s doing or not. He’s taking definitive action, according to his own rights, and according to recommendations of his council. And if you believe that that is the way we should be going, then you’ve got to say he’s doing a great job. If you happen to be in opposition, then you are going to say, “Hold on a minute. Let’s examine this a little more closely.”

SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON

Walter Cronkite was a proponent of dependable journalism without adornment. That may have been the result of heritage as much as training. Cronkite the glamorous editor channeling Walter the Depression-era child.

He was born Saturday, 4 November 1916, in St. Joseph, Missouri. His roots were pure Midwestern and modest. The practicality of his Dutch heritage resonates on every line of his resume. Offered an exciting promotion or a raise, he always took the money. He learned well from this mother, Helen, who kept the family afloat by hawking World Book Encyclopedias while his father, Walter Sr., built a fledgling

dental practice. (Walter Sr. would later develop an outstanding reputation and go into academic dentistry in Houston).

Cronkite attended the University of Texas and studied journalism, and he left in 1935 without graduating and was hired by radio station KCMO where he met a young, talented copywriter named Betsy Maxwell. They were assigned to read a commercial script, which on-air talent did in those days. Cronkite's then not-quite-famous voice whispered to Betsy, "Hello Angel. What heaven did you drop from?" With a smoothie who spoke like that, what else could she do but marry him (4 years later)?

During 1937, the new fiancée aimed his sights on a media career at UPI, one of the leading news organizations in the world. It was either a stroke of luck or genius. He would go on to become one of the top war correspondents of World War II, covering battles in North Africa and Europe.

His first overseas assignment was in London where CBS' Edward R. Murrow, then the most famous broadcaster in America, offered Cronkite a job. He gratefully accepted, then reneged after a generous counteroffer from UPI (following the money, as always). For Murrow, who grew up in radio, the shift to the new technology of television was natural. For Cronkite, a dedicated print journalist, it's possible it felt risky. Whichever the reason, Murrow never forgave the slight, and Cronkite believed the celebrity radioman held a lifelong grudge. It might explain why Cronkite was never inducted into that hallowed fraternity, "The Murrow Boys," like Eric Sevareid, Charles Collingwood, and Howard K. Smith.

Then fate smiled when UPI chose Cronkite to be one of eight journalists to fly air raids in a B-17. His particular squadron took on the peculiar name "The Writing 69th," which was a play on the famous "Fighting 69th," the regiment named by Robert E. Lee. During his time with UPI in Europe, Cronkite covered the Battle of the Bulge, the Nuremberg Trials, and both the D-Day invasion and the liberation of Europe.

After the war had ended, Cronkite went to Moscow where the Stalinists kept a close watch, and he soon became bored. Then in 1950, he got a second offer from CBS and this time accepted and returned to the United States. There, he came under the watchful eye of founder and chairman Bill Paley and CBS honchos Frank Stanton, Dick Salant, and producer Don Hewitt. Like the good judges of talent they were, they trotted their new star through a series of news, talk, sports, and election coverage (he even hosted a game show, *It's News to Me*). He was a big catch at the time, and he made quite an impression on a young producer who would go on to create *60 Minutes*. "Our main man at the convention was going to be Walter Cronkite," said Don



FIGURE 5. Announcing the death of JFK. Photo credit: CBS News archives.

Hewitt. I remembered Cronkite as a great print journalist from London during the war.”

Once Cronkite warmed up in the CBS bullpen, he was tapped to replace America’s first news anchor, Douglas Edwards (who had a drinking problem, practically an epidemic in the American media business). CBS showed supreme confidence by changing the program to the *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. It also became the first half-hour news broadcast on network television. The era of building a celebrity, then leveraging his fame to promote the show, had begun.

When Cronkite got the promotion, he was pleased, but there would be no ego trip:

I was very excited about the opportunity to take it over. It’s a big job, obviously . . . but I did not contemplate it, nor did I have any plans of what I’d do if I got it; none of that sort of thing ever crossed my mind. I always lived in broadcasting day to day with the idea I was going to be fired the next day.

ANNOUNCING THE DEATH OF JFK

The story behind the JFK assassination and Cronkite’s emotional reaction on the air is one of the most iconic moments in television history. The actual story of the broadcast shows how randomness plays

a role in a news scoop, even under tragic circumstances, as he related to NPR's *All Things Considered*:

UPI teletypes around the world started ticking out in the CBS newsroom in New York, from where my colleague Ed Bliss shouted across the room. I leaped from my desk to get on the air. But the cameras were not yet in place for the evening news so I rushed into an adjoining radio booth. CBS was ten minutes into its daily drama *As the World Turns* when a *CBS News* bulletin slide appeared on the screen and a different drama took over the air. In New York, our television cameras were up within 15 minutes. I sat at the news desk in shirt sleeves surrounded by telephones, typewriters, a clutter of papers and a lone apple that sat on the front edge of the desk. By 2:30 there was a mounting consensus to the rumors.

Eddy Barker was news director of CBS's Dallas affiliate and had some of the best police sources in the city. He was among the first to learn the true facts and he worked closely with Bob Pierpoint and Dan Rather, who were covering the Kennedy visit for the network. I marked time. "There is the report in Dallas that the president is dead, but that has not been confirmed by any other source."

Ten minutes later Press Officer Malcolm Kilduff released the news and it was official. It fell to me to make the announcement for CBS. My emotion was apparent as I fought to control my composure, locking it inside a clenched jaw.

"From Dallas, Texas, the flash apparently official, President Kennedy died at 1:00 pm Central Standard Time, 2:00 Eastern Standard Time, some 38 minutes ago. Vice President Lyndon Johnson has left the hospital . . ."

The viewership of three networks came to over 175 million—the largest number of TV viewers of a single subject in American history. The country looked to national and local news chambers for any clue to guide it through this national tragedy. It connected people not only to television in a way that changed the medium but also to one another. For instance, in Cincinnati, there was an ABC affiliate news anchor and a pal of Cronkite's by the name of Nick Clooney, who had a son named George, barely 2 years old.

Walter Cronkite and George Clooney later became friends, and the avuncular anchorman vacationed with the handsome star and their wives at Clooney's sumptuous villa on Lake Como. The subject of their meeting was a film project, *JFK: News of a Shooting*, which looked at the events of 22 November 1963 through the eyes of the CBS

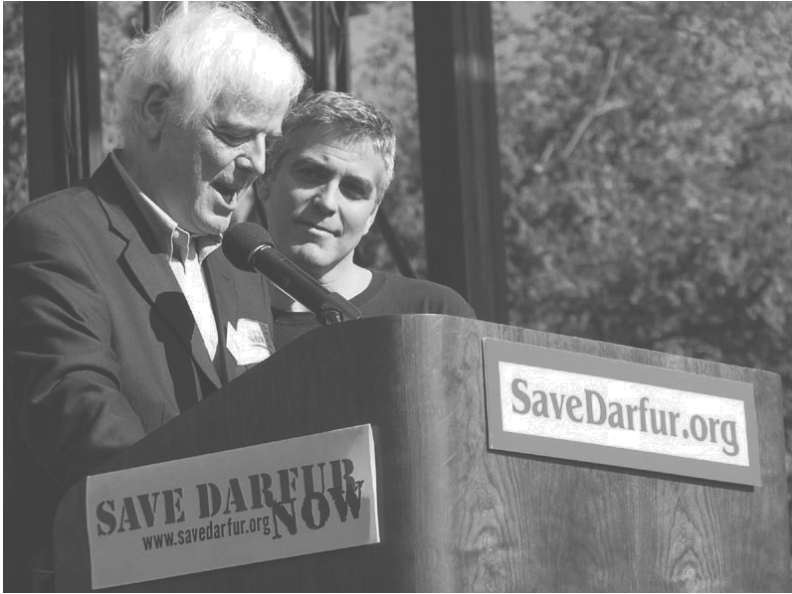


FIGURE 6. Clooney father and son, both friends of Cronkite. Photo credit: Hillary Dempster.

anchorman. Clooney was schooled on Walter Cronkite from his father, and his research for the film only confirmed what he had heard. He said:

In times of crisis—the Kennedy assassination, September 11—people go to the place they most trust the news. Because now it’s important that it’s not just accurate but it’s also important that it’s put in perspective—and that’s something that doesn’t happen with speed. You can’t get the big moments wrong; you’ve got to get them right. Walter Cronkite understood that and was willing to risk not being first to not get it wrong. Cronkite was an old wire-service reporter who had lived his life by the maxim “get it first, but first get it right,” something that I feel is missing in News today.

OUTSIDE THE ANCHOR BOOTH

He had second anchorman job. This was the nautical kind, on his sailing yacht, *Wyntje*, named for his maternal great-grandmother. She was a 64' Hinckley that he skippered around Edgartown off Martha's Vineyard (where he met the renowned photographer Peter Simon whose pictures grace this article) and occasionally down to Bermuda. He apparently enjoyed being in control on the bridge as much as on the anchor desk, according to his crew member Jenny Goff: “Walter almost never leaves the wheel.” Cronkite trivia records that he took up sailing



FIGURE 7. "Walter almost never leaves the wheel." Photo credit: Peter Simon.

only when CBS told him his car racing habit was going to violate a clause in his life insurance.

He similarly loved the vast reaches of outer space and the NASA space program. As anchorman and reporter, he would carefully explain arcane technical space trivia to viewers who watched spellbound as Alan Shepard flew his short mission and Neil Armstrong flew his longer one. When, on 20 July 1969, the Eagle settled down on the Moon, a visibly ecstatic Walter Cronkite was shouting with the same boyish fascination as his viewers: "Oh, boy!"

His father, Walter Cronkite, Sr., a troubled alcoholic, lost his wife and children because of an addiction to the bottle. But the son found a happy medium in the companionship of the tavern. There was nothing Cronkite enjoyed more than industry gossip, a good story, and bawdy jokes over drinks with celebrity news colleagues like Mike Wallace; Tom Brokaw; his producer, Sandy Socolow; and war buddies Andy Rooney or Morley Safer.

Cronkite and his wife, Betsy, enjoyed a 64-year, colorful relationship until her death in 2005. They treated each other as a well-matched pair in all but one respect: her wit. No one would risk trading barbs with Betsy Cronkite as she had a sharp and infectious sense of humor that kept his feet on the ground, literally. Tom Brokaw recalled the scene:

On a Kentucky Derby weekend Walter and I were invited to go aloft in hot air balloons. As we lifted off, I could hear Betsy saying



FIGURE 8. Walter and Betsy. Photo credit: Peter Simon.

to Walter over the two-way radio, “We’re down here dividing up your things. Do you still want that burial at sea?”

As Morley Safer puts it, “To say that Walter Cronkite enjoyed being Walter Cronkite would be an understatement. The kid from St. Joe never quite got over the fact that he had made it into the big leagues.”

Brokaw goes on to point out that the Cronkite’s were the “it” couple in New York at the time:

Broadway opening nights and movie premieres—and they didn’t miss many—were always enlivened by the presence of the Cronkites, who had a wide range of good friends, including John Steinbeck, Eli Wallach, Toots Shor, Mike Wallace, Andy Rooney, Jackie Kennedy, Art Buchwald, and Bill and Rose Styron as well as—get this—Mickey Hart, the drummer for the Grateful Dead, a fellow sailing enthusiast. Walter occasionally appeared on stage at “Dead” concerts.

EPILOGUE

Walter Cronkite never ceased yearning for his old anchor desk. During the last chapter of his storied life, the news business exerted a pull like gravitational forces did on his beloved astronauts. In a 2003 interview, CNN’s Larry King asked bluntly, “Walter, do you miss it?” Cronkite confessed:



FIGURE 9. Cronkite on the bridge. Photo credit: Peter Simon.

Every day. Every minute of the day. I hear [the stories] on the radio. I see them on the Internet. And I wish I could get my hands on that story, you know? It's the old fire horse. When the bell rings, you want to go.

Walter Cronkite died at the age of 92 on 17 July 2009. It could be said without hyperbole, as Hamlet did of his father: "He was a man, take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again."

Afterword

I have my own Walter and Betsy Cronkite vignette. It was 1990, and I was having a drink at a bar in Tangiers, Morocco. It was the kind of gathering you find on the cover of *Vanity Fair*: King Hassan and the royal family, Jimmy Goldsmith, Robert Maxwell, Ron Perlman, Henry Kravis, Ted Forstmann, Diane Von Furstenberg and Barry Diller, Bill and Pat Buckley, Calvin Klein, and Elizabeth Taylor. We were celebrating the 70th birthday of my boss, Malcolm Forbes, at his home, the Palais Mendoub.

Then Walter Cronkite walks in sporting a dazzling white dinner jacket, of course. He orders a drink at the bar and turns to introduce himself like I have no idea who he is. "Hi, I'm Walter Cronkite." Soon we are getting along like a pair of prep school chums. He grabs his martini, takes a pull, and regales me with sailing lore for 20 minutes when a less-than-patient Betsy walks over to see what is taking so long.



FIGURE 10. Walter and Betsy in Tangiers, Morocco, with the author (1990). Photo credit: Glenn Davis, Forbes Magazine archives

Betsy: Walter, The King (of Morocco) wants to say hello.

Cronkite: The King? Well, Jeff, I better be off.

Betsy: Don't worry Walter. I'm sure it's just professional courtesy.

Elected 1994

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2 This profile has been written for the American Philosophical Society among whose distinguished members was a plainsman from St. Joseph, Missouri, Walter Leland Cronkite, Jr. It is published on *Medium* for wider distribution to students and any audience with a general interest in his remarkable story. I have relied extensively on several outstanding works and articles. Given the informal nature of this article, extensive footnotes are replaced by this short bibliography, and gratitude for these author's efforts is wholly offered.