

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Practical Lessons in Leadership and Communication

Walter Leland Cronkite: 1916-2009

The Passing of the Man, and the End of an Era

It's hard to believe that the last presidential campaign Walter Cronkite covered was 29 years ago — Ronald Reagan's 1980 election victory over Jimmy Carter. When a person of such longstanding influence passes on, it often is a great opportunity to consider their contribution to society, the world and our daily lives.

I've spent the better part of the last two days searching out video and audio files of Mr. Cronkite's broadcasts. There is some wonderful archival footage out there. In watching and listening, I reacquainted myself with Mr. Cronkite the newsman, and I've realized that his passing represents so much more than the death of the man. It also represents the end of trustworthy and agenda-free news coverage.

Mr. Cronkite was the very definition of integrity — “the most trusted man in America,” as he is still being referred to, even after his death. He was perceived by many to be without bias in his reporting, the one man in America who would give the straight story. He was human, of course, which means he certainly did have some bias in the way he looked at and reported on the world. But the perception was otherwise. And even those who accused him of bias still listened to him and largely respected him. His signature sign-off at the end of his CBS broadcasts, “*And that's the way it is...* ,” perfectly captured the role he played in America's collective consciousness. If Mr. Cronkite said that's the way it was, then that's the way it was.

It's not just his integrity that I'll miss, however. It's what *gave him that integrity* that is so lacking in contemporary news culture. Can you imagine any print, television or radio journalist today being referred to as “the most trusted person in America”? I can't. We live in a world where every journalist, commentator and “personality” (that's the only way I can

define some of the people who masquerade as journalists) has political bias. Nearly every one of them is easily connected to a political view, party or agenda, and both the Right and the Left are guilty. For every Keith Olbermann there is a Rush Limbaugh. For every Ann Coulter there is a Rachel Maddow.

We now exist in some strange world where the line between journalism and entertainment is so blurred, it is nearly invisible. To test this reality, I often ask friends where they would go for totally unbiased, agenda-free news coverage. Some people mention CNN, believe it or not, and some go even closer to the source and mention the Associated Press. But there are no consistent answers. And when I ask the question not about news organizations but, rather, about individual reporters and journalists, the answer is usually silence.

The greatest example of the respect Mr. Cronkite commanded occurred after his February 27, 1968, editorial where he condemned the Vietnam War and the White House's handling of it. After hearing the broadcast, President Lyndon Johnson reportedly said, “If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost America.” Within weeks, Johnson announced he would not seek reelection that year, becoming the only sitting president in the 20th century who chose not to seek a second elected term in office.

Mr. Cronkite is still the standard of journalistic integrity, 28 years after retiring from *CBS News*. I'll miss him greatly. I long for an era when Americans could trust implicitly what our news organizations and news reporters said and wrote... and, more importantly, when those organizations and news reporters deserved such trust.

And that's the way it is... or, at least, the way it was.

• Dean Brenner
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Wallingford, CT