



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 14, 2009

## Katie Couric, Walter Cronkite, and Journalism

Say what you will about Walter Cronkite, he was a serious journalist who would, at times, challenge the establishment line, as when he turned against the Vietnam War and editorialized against it. "If we've lost Walter Cronkite, we've lost America," Lyndon Johnson reportedly said.



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Walter Cronkite had an avuncular presence that was often comforting, but he was not in front of the camera for the CBS Evening News night after night because of either his good looks or his pleasing personality. Neither was Douglas Fairbanks. Neither, at NBC, were Chet Huntley or David Brinkley. They were there to tell us "the way it is." And though they did not always do so, they at least came closer to doing so than today's media counterparts. Yes, they were left-leaning liberals, just as conservatives charged. But they at least challenged America's rulers enough to make them uncomfortable. Thus, when Johnson's War in Vietnam became Nixon's War and the pundits of the media royalty continued to publish negative stories and question the efficacy or "Vietnamization," Vice President Spiro T. Agnew went after the media moguls, calling them an unbearable part of an "effete corps of impudent snobs, who characterize themselves as intellectuals."

My, how times have changed! The best reporting on the run up to the Iraq War, known officially as "Operation Iraqi Freedom," was done after the fact by PBS correspondent Bill Moyers in a documentary called *The Buying of the War*. The salesmen were, of course, Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and their Little Sir Echoes in the Pentagon and State Department. The buyers were the major news organizations, both print and electronic, and the public that depends on them for information about national and world events. The popular press lived down to the expectations of men like the late Adlai Stevenson, who summed up the role of the media as the duty to "separate the wheat from the chaff — and print the chaff."

Nowadays, the news media does not even do that much. There is no separation of the wheat from the chaff by the news organizations. They let the White House do that. That is why there were almost no



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skeptical, probing questions asked about the Bush administration's claims about Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction." The White House and cabinet officials must have been anticipating and even counting on that when they issued statements they knew were not true. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said that the administration not only knew that Saddam had such weapons, "We know where they are." A pity he didn't tell the inspectors who were looking for any such weapons. Amazing, too, that our invading armies were in Iraq for about a year before formally giving up the search for those elusive, mysterious weapons.

So Rumsfeld had to clarify. "I should have said, 'We know where they were,'" he explained lamely. In other words, Saddam, the tricky old devil, had taken those weapons and hid them, like Easter eggs. Well, gol-ly! Could 'a' fooled ol' Rummy. Fooled the news media, too.

A Walter Cronkite or an Edward R. Murrow might have treated those claims with a little skepticism. Then again, maybe not. The major news media kept silent about the planning of the Bay of Pigs fiasco until it was carried out. They swallowed whole the phony "incident" in the Gulf of Tonkin that drew us ever deeper into the Vietnam War. Cronkite's famous declaration of non-support came nearly four years later, after the Tet offensive. The media generally reported the Pentagon version of the war, body count and all.

So what does it mean now that CBS news anchor Katie Couric has won the latest Walter Cronkite award for "Special Impact on the 2008 Campaign" for president? Couric has been recognized for her "extraordinary persistent and detailed multi-part interviews with Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin," which the judges called "a defining moment in the 2008 presidential campaign."

That's it? Interviews with Sarah Palin? That's not exactly 18 holes with Tiger Woods or one round with Muhammad Ali. Did Couric uncover anything more substantial than the fact that under her "persistent and detailed" questioning, an obviously rattled and defensive Gov. Palin couldn't think of the name of a single newspaper or magazine she reads regularly. "All of 'em," she said.

*"Aha! Gotcha!"*

Did Couric ever probe behind the press releases churned out by the Pentagon. Did she uncover any plots for the next war or the next crisis in 'Homeland Security?' Did she or anyone else at CBS News seriously and credibly challenge any government assertion? Any government policy or program? If so, it is not considered as important as her "persistent and detailed" effort to discredit and even destroy last year's Republican vice presidential candidate.

The award is given annually by Reliable Resources, a group run out of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California. Its mission statement says, "Reliable Resources was created to help generate conversation and ideas on improving broadcast political coverage. Broadcast news, network and local, has declined significantly as a primary source for campaign news. Our project seeks to design and distribute tools which would make political news enlightening, informative and exciting to local and network broadcasters."

Does anyone remember who it was who broke the story that Sen. Joe Biden, now the vice president, practiced plagiarism when, during his 1988 Democratic presidential primary campaign, he delivered as his own a speech by British Labor Party leader Neil Kinnock? The award from a university center named after left-wing activist and Hollywood mainstay Norman Lear is not likely to memorialize any Davids who bring down liberal Goliaths. It is not unlike the Profile in Courage Award made annually by the Kennedy Center. John F. Kennedy's book about men of courage in the U.S. Senate was, of necessity, a



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slender volume, honoring the likes of John Quincy Adams, Sam Houston, and Robert Taft. The award, named after the book, has been given to the likes of former Connecticut Governor Lowell P. Weicker, who having won election by campaigning against a state income tax, launched a successful campaign for an income tax once in office. Had it been the other way around — had he campaigned for an income tax and then vetoed it upon further consideration — it is quite unlikely he would have received the Profile in Courage Award from the Kennedy Center.

So now “Cutie” Couric wins the Cronkite award. It may not be justice. It may not even be mercy. As John F. Kennedy once explained at a White House press conference, “Life is unfair.” And, as “Uncle” Walter said each night ... “That’s the way it is.”

*Photo: AP Images*



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