

Tip of the Iceberg

NBC anchor Brian Williams, who, after ten years of what Mao Tse-tung condemned as “putting on the airs of the veteran,” is in limbo after being exposed as a fraudulent poseur as a war correspondent under fire in Iraq. But this is tokenism, scapegoating; many prominent news commentators are in the entertainment business, as are most politicians, and there is a strong tradition among them of egocentric fabrication. It is implausible, and even bizarre, for the higher-ups at NBC News to become so unctuous about Williams, when the whole industry is infested with myth-makers and tendentious partisans who, in their daily reporting, can often be assumed to be taking liberties with the truth whenever you see their lips move.

They take after the politicians about whom they report. The last Democratic presidential candidate who was not caught flat-footed in untruths was the ill-starred trivia question Michael Dukakis (1988). Bill Clinton famously got to the edge of perjury with “It depends upon what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is,” and, though an effective president in many ways, was even more of a charming dissembler than most successful politicians. Al Gore claimed to have invented the Internet, and much of what he alleged in his environmental film *An Inconvenient Truth*, which made him a Nobel laureate and helped him on his way to becoming a centimillionaire, was a fiction, starting with the imminent disappearance beneath the waves of the island country of Tuvalu, because of melting polar ice. John Kerry, the 2004 nominee, was caught red-handed inventing his status as a hero of the Vietnam swift boats, and the incumbent president’s liberties with the facts are too notorious to be recited here. A fine example was last week’s speech at the National Prayer Breakfast, where he twice invoked the name of Jesus Christ in pejorative contexts that he would not replicate for the Prophet, and effectively equated Islamic terrorism (not that he is capable yet of

putting those words consecutively, or of admitting that there is such a thing) to the Crusades, the Inquisition, slavery, and segregation.

The presumptive 2016 Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, was let off very lightly by the media for her barefaced assertion that, as wife of the president, she had had to dodge sniper fire at Sarajevo airport during the Bosnian War. When the news film was produced of her arrival on a placid day with a festively costumed band and curtsying little girls presenting bouquets, she blamed her "misrecollection" on the mischievous distortions of jet lag. Not even so feeble an excuse as that was offered when she told an audience in New Zealand that she was particularly pleased to be there because her parents were so impressed by the conquest of Mount Everest by New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary that they named her after Sir Edmund. Unfortunately, Sir Edmund scaled the highest mountain in the world to its peak in 1953, almost six years after Mrs. Clinton was christened Hillary (1947).

This is not to suggest that Republicans are always pillars of veracity, but they have more often tended to embarrassing candor or sincere confusion, as in Mitt Romney's lamentation of the 47 percent of Americans who receive benefits from the government, or John McCain's response to the 2008 financial crisis, which ranged, in that fraught week, from soothingly quoting Herbert Hoover, to rage against greed (an attitude imputed exclusively to the private sector), to demanding the dismissal of the chairman of the SEC and his replacement by, of all bad brainwaves, Andrew Cuomo, to suspending his campaign, such as it was, saying nothing at a White House crisis session, and supporting a Republican economic reignition plan that was rejected by Congress. All in all, George W. Bush's stirring admonition that "the sucker" (i.e., the U.S. economy, not the electorate, though they were for these purposes one and the same) "could go down" was more coherent. Most often in living memory, Republican presidents

have been in the Eisenhower tradition of mangled syntax; it was deliberate obfuscation with Ike, but not with Gerald Ford and the Bushes.

There lingers in public memory a benign nostalgia that previous news-readers and anchors were people of immense integrity and insight. The most frequent beneficiary of this veneration is Walter Cronkite, who was a very agreeable man who had a reassuring country-doctor aspect, highlighted by his avuncular moustache. But Walter was only a reporter; he didn't know much history or geography, and his attempts to explain political phenomena were generally banal or simply mistaken, such as when, in one of his historical records of great moments of the 20th century, he described the Hungarian and Polish attacks on Czechoslovakia after the mutilation of that country at the Munich Conference in 1938 as the innocent taking of "buffer zones" opposite Nazi Germany. The territory did not separate the aggressor countries from Germany, and Hungary was a German satellite anyway. It didn't matter, Walter just made it up.

His greatest moment as a conscientious journalist is generally taken to be his assertion in Saigon, after the Tet Offensive in 1968, when he returned to his hotel in his World War II war correspondent's full kit, including an army helmet, and declared that the United States was losing the Vietnam War. In fact, it had just won one of the great victories in U.S. military history. If President Johnson had had the military instinct of a good commander in chief, as Lincoln and Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt did, he would have given a speech proclaiming victory and incorporating most of what was in Richard Nixon's Silent Majority speech of 21 months later, would have begun withdrawals, and would have been reelected. Instead, as all the world knows, he folded, and was chased from the White House by Ho Chi Minh, as his theater commander, General William Westmoreland – who had ignored the advice of Douglas MacArthur and Dwight D. Eisenhower to cut the Ho Chi

Minh Trail – asked Johnson for a completely unfeasible further 200,000 draftees. As Nixon demonstrated, contrary to Cronkite's portentous asseveration, the war was still salvageable with a change of commander and strategy.

Walter Cronkite didn't deliberately lie as Brian Williams and many of these politicians have, but the whole group of prominent American World War II foreign correspondents – Cronkite, Edward R. Murrow, Eric Sevareid, Theodore White – pretended to a more sophisticated geopolitical worldliness than they possessed as they introduced isolationist America to the world in a hazardously simplistic fashion. Cronkite was energetic, and was present at many events, especially Anwar Sadat's trip to Jerusalem, but his opinions were never based on anything more than good, old-fashioned, Norman Rockwell American altruism. Ed Murrow's sepulchral smoke-wearied voice did wonders for British war propaganda as he narrated the Blitz from London in 1940. (He was ardently courted by the British government and even had a torrid affair with the prime minister's daughter-in-law, Pamela Digby. She eventually married the wartime Lend-Lease administrator, Averell Harriman, while the U.S. ambassador, John G. Winant, took up with the prime minister's own daughter – Mr. Churchill was an indulgent father and a full-service ally.) The weightier comments at CBS News were generally left to Eric Sevareid, who claimed to be the heir and protégé of Murrow and Walter Lippmann, the most famous of the pundits. But none of them look very prescient in retrospect. Lippmann thought FDR a lightweight when he was running as a candidate for the White House, then urged him to institute a virtual fascist dictatorship to fight the depression; never really understood his war policy, though he was an early appreciator of the need to get Charles de Gaulle on board; and he opposed retention of U.S. forces in Europe after World War II. Sevareid's departure comments from CBS in 1977 were among the most pompous utterances ever telecast in the United States.

Almost the entire media apparatus was complicit in what amounted to the bloodless assassination of Richard Nixon, albeit that he effectively cooperated with it by bungling the Watergate affair. But that does not excuse the collective self-canonization of the Nixonicides, who confected and transmitted the myth that Nixon assaulted the Constitution, even threatened their physical safety, and was, in all American presidential history, uniquely morally unqualified to be president. There is no real evidence that he committed crimes and never was any, and there is no doubt that his one full term was one of the most successful in the country's history, which is why he was reelected by 18 million votes. And there is particularly no justification for the media's complacent and hypocritical quiescence in the subsequent lies of the chief Watergate assassin, Bob Woodward: his outright invention, at the end of his book [Veil](#), of a confession of guilt in the Iran-Contra affair by former CIA director William Casey, when Casey was in fact in a coma and heavily guarded in a hospital room, or even his malicious pastiche of falsehoods in his biography of John Belushi.

By all means, send Brian Williams packing, but do not imagine that that will preserve or retrieve one jot of the self-shredded credibility of the U.S national media. They went from utter credulity in Vietnam to complete defeatism, crucified the president who got seriously into the war, and then crucified the president who saved the war, and helped deliver Indochina to the North Vietnamese Communists and Khmer Rouge who killed millions in the post-war massacres, the Cambodian Killing Fields, and the flight of the Boat People. They tried to assimilate Nicaragua and El Salvador to Vietnam; denied at every turn that Reagan's defense buildup and anti-missile defense would produce any progress in arms control or the Cold War; never had the faintest hint that forcing the U.S financial industry into trillions of dollars of under-secured mortgages could lead to trouble; and have conducted a stentorian hallelujah chorus for the most incompetent

president since James Buchanan. Of course, there have been many good newspeople, but the network newscasts are now just social-interest pap and they don't resonate with the country. They betrayed their viewers and listeners, and not with harmless piffle like Williams's invented derring-do; and that is why they have been displaced by social media and by independent commentators like Rush Limbaugh, Laura Ingraham, and Ann Coulter.

What is called for is what has been missing: repentance and integrity. Apart from basic freedoms, the principal criteria of a flourishing democracy are the rule of law and a free and responsible press. Inexplicably, in the United States, both have failed – not completely, to be sure, but both get failing grades. Fortunately, the country itself is overwhelmingly strong and can survive almost anything. It undoubtedly possesses the genius of renewal, and this is probably already under way. But firing Brian Williams is like the wife of the bankrupt socialite (Lionel Barrymore) in the 1933 film *Dinner at Eight* promising to fire the florist.

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