

Opinion: If only we had Walter Cronkite today

By Tina Brown, Newsweek

What a lucky dog Walter Cronkite was. You really could be the Voice of God in an era when all America was called to worship at 7 o'clock every night at a temple called the evening news and there was an oracular ring to every scripted utterance. Cronkite was a construct of national authority. Because TV news had an unchallenged monopoly on America's attention span, he controlled not just the message of the news but also the message of himself as Uncle Walter, the man America could trust. That reassuring probity was all the more treasured because his rise coincided with the country's descent into the swamp of Vietnam, a war with which his reputation for honesty became intricately interwoven.

Yet after reading Douglas Brinkley's superb new biography, *Cronkite*, media critic Howard Kurtz, *Newsweek's* Washington bureau chief, decides that today he might well be writing that Cronkite should be kicked off the air. Uncle Walter committed all manner of journalistic infractions, from taking freebie trips to manipulating a softball taped interview to make himself look combative. He even caroused with strippers.

Of course ours is not an age of icons: we are too cynical and irreverent now—and just plain nasty—to leave people on a pedestal for too long. So the larger question is what use Cronkite made of his cloak of immunity from apparent human weakness. The answer is that he used it judiciously. Nobody who saw his broadcasts will ever forget that evening in 1968, when back in New York after weeks in the jungles of Vietnam, he shed his ostensibly neutral role to deliver the verdict to the nation that, for all the propaganda, the war was unwinnable. He could no longer accept watching Americans fight

and die for a lost cause because politicians would not admit the obvious. That wasn't humbug. That was brave.

Perhaps we could have done with Cronkite when TV networks allowed themselves to be bullied by the Bush administration into jingoistic coverage of the invasion of Iraq and Fox was calling out dissenters as unpatriotic. One likes to think he would have told it straight and, more important, people would have believed him—if only because there was no one else to listen to. Today, attention is so fractured, there is no commanding voice capable of making a distracted American public focus on the consequences of another unwinnable war. Thanks to media absenteeism and an all-volunteer Army, there is a heart-breaking disconnect between the men and women who sacrifice so much and the oblivious rest of us who don't.

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