

# Judy Woodruff: “The American People Are Counting on Us”

Interviewed by Mort Silverstein of  
*Television in America*, she comments  
forcefully on partisan journalism.

**T**he interview traced not only Woodruff's acclaimed career in broadcast journalism, which began by overcoming the heavily polluted sexist atmosphere present in many newsrooms, but also reporting on the kitchen-table issues of health care, the economy, war and human rights, which surrounded the presidents she covered as NBC'S White House correspondent – Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Subsequently, she anchored breaking news and developing stories for the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, and since 1993 has been anchoring such series as CNN's *Inside Politics* and now *America Votes 2004*. Silverstein began by asking Ms. Woodruff about the power of network news, quoting an anecdote in her autobiography, *This is Judy Woodruff at the White House*.

**Mort Silverstein:** Twenty years ago,

when you were NBC News's White House correspondent, you wrote in this book a chapter called “More Vast Than Wasteland,” an allusion to Newton Minow's famous line. Referring to the presidential campaign of 1980, you noted that some folks were floating the idea of drafting Walter Cronkite for president. A colleague said, not entirely in jest, why in the world would Cronkite want to be president of the United States and give up all that power?

**Judy Woodruff:** Twenty years later, there's still power, not just that the anchors have, but that the news organizations have. But it's a more diffuse power, I would say. Because the audiences are smaller. Quite frankly, we don't have the audiences today, in one place, at one network, or even at the three major broadcast networks, that we had in the 1960s and '70s and, and the 1980s yet

again. CNN had such a successful formula, some other people came along and said, well, we want to try that too. And so we have some competition now. I think competition's good. Some of our competitors have a different approach to doing the news than I do, but, you know, that's the way it is. The American people pick and choose.



**MS:** Fox News, you report, we report, you decide, or, we report, you deride, or something...what's your appraisal of the Fox News?

**There was an ideological goal in the creation of Fox...To me, we're here to do news.**

**JW:** You know, my view is that they do what they want to do, and let the consumer judge. I think, it seems to me that Fox has decided that it's all right for reporters to, from time to time, inject their own opinion. I think Fox was created with the idea that a lot of journalism tilted left. And it was their responsibility to correct that by moving, they would say, to the center. Others would say they moved to the right. I don't think my personal opinion matters so much.



But my problem with the whole premise is that, is that there was an ideological goal in the creation of Fox. At least it's my interpretation of it. And to me, we're here to do news. It's not, it shouldn't be the basis for the creation of a news

organization. But that's what they've chosen to do. And it doesn't change my thinking about journalism. I'm still coming from where I was coming from. It hasn't changed the thinking of, I think, a lot of people I know. And there's just a really healthy argument underway right now. I mean, I know, my good friend Brit Hume at Fox and I disagree very strongly about that. I mean, he's coming at it from a different place. He says the rest of the news has been too left, too tilted. In my opinion, it hasn't been. Yes, a lot of journalists are activists. We came out of the '60s. We wanted to make the world better.

We wanted to right all the wrongs, we

wanted to make a contribution. And if you want to interpret that as not just activism, but liberalism, I think it's going too far. But I do agree that it is activism. And to the extent you're a conservative and you're watching and you're thinking, you know, who are you to say whether we ought to fix a problem or not?

But there's a good, healthy debate going on right now. We'll see who wins. Where I'm coming from is, journalism is a profession that is intended to, to help people understand what's going on in the world, to help 'em understand what's going on around them, and to let people make their own decisions. Now, is the process, journalists share the platform, share the stage, with people who give opinion? I mean, every day on *Inside Politics*, the program I anchor on CNN, we have people that come on and give opinion. We have debates, almost every day, on the program. We label them as such. We identify people, we say, Babe Buchanan, from the right. We describe the organization that she's with, and then we'll say Donna Brazile, who was Al Gore's campaign manager. And they will have at it, on one issue another. Sometimes they agree. I'm entirely comfortable doing that. Am I comfortable giving my own opinion? No. I don't think I'm serving our viewers, our consumers well if I try to pass off Judy Woodruff's opinions as news.

When I first started in the business, when Huntley and Brinkley did their report, it was the stone tablets. Now we know, mistakes are sometimes made. But that doesn't mean that we don't try very hard, day in and day out, to get it

right. When I'm sitting there reading a story on CNN, or telling the audience what I'm hearing or what I'm learning, I'm trying very hard to get it right. And being very conscious of not making a mistake, of not misleading, of keeping things in context.

**MS:** And attribution is vital.

**We are putting people on the air and letting them spout opinion and analysis and sometimes we don't label them adequately.**

**JW:** Attribution absolutely, because people can be standing on a street corner saying, did you hear? And it's our job not to put that on the air. I mean, even if a good source gives us information. Unless we can check it out with other sources, think about the motivations of the people who are giving you the story, unless you can pull all that together, and, and help the viewer understand that this is...

An evolving thing, then you're not really doing them any, any service. But we have to be, I think a little more humble.

**MS:** In a Kennedy School lecture, you criticized the "networks' reliance on television pundits to analyze the recent events, which often undermine their own credibility." Referring to these pundits, you said, "they parade as journalists, but have never paid their dues. The concept of accountability is alien. All that matters are attention and ratings." Can you be more specific?

**JW:** We have gotten to the point that we are putting people on the air and letting them spout opinion and analysis and sometimes we don't label them

adequately. We don't tell people what their credentials are and where they're coming from and why we're giving them this air time. I think it's being done in too many places on television. I think it has long ago blurred the line between journalism reporting, and opinion. It used to be that it was pretty clear. We made a pretty clear distinction between reporting. On the one hand, news, and opinion, over here. And then at some point along the way, we threw in analysis, and we said, we're analyzing stories, you know, newspapers label it as analysis, typically. And we started to do that, but then at some point along the way, then we started mixing, we had reporters who were appearing at other times as commentators. Or maybe they were giving analysis, but then that sort of slid over into commentary. You know, there are those who argue, well, what the heck? Who cares? The public knows what's going on. I'm a little more old fashioned about it. Lines need to be drawn, and that when we cross those lines, we need to tell the audience what we're doing. I'm not saying the public is permanently damaged by this. I don't think the Republic is going to fall. I just think that, the public, the people, deserve better than that.

**MS:** You were talking about the body blow of 9-11 and the surprise. And I wonder how much of that is attributable to the fact that several years ago, we had – and then you talked about this – foreign correspondents were a significant element of network television journalism. Each had 15 to 20 foreign bureaus. Today they have less than half that. I remember the famous Larry Tisch tour of the CBS news bureaus. “Where is everybody?” he asked. “Why do we need

15 to 20 people?” and so forth. I think that's where CNN came in, right, to fill that gap?

**JW:** I think that's part of it...

**JW:** I was not there at the beginning of CNN, but I know that one of Ted Turner's goals was to cover the world, was to get news out 24 hours a day. Because his view was, you know, we live on a shrinking planet; we're all much more connected than ever before. And if that was true in 1980, when he started CNN, it's certainly true 22 years later, in 2002, when you and I are talking. We are connected; we've seen that even more now than ever before, with the terror attacks of September the 11th; we see it with what we watch going on in the Middle East; we see it with events in China, in, in Japan and North Korea. People watch the Japanese market, the Japanese economy. When we, they catch a cold, the rest of the world catches pneumonia.

**MS:** What was your reaction to the early White House request not to air, or if so, to dramatically abridge any videotapes of Osama bin Laden?

**JW:** Well, I think, first of all that was at a very scary time in our country. And we didn't know what was going on with Osama bin Laden. It wasn't clear just how widespread his tentacles were, how many more people he had planted in the United States who were waiting to do something horrible. And so the Administration was understandably shaky about that. We were feeling shaky about it. With all of us in the media the thinking was, well, we're the last ones to want to do anything to jeopardize lives in

this country. Or anywhere, for that matter. So I think at the time, people felt that maybe they're right. But I think it became clear pretty quickly after that that the American people can handle the information. Put it on, let them make the decision. And if there are secret signals in there, we're as likely to see them as they are. It became a little specious, I think, that [government argument].

**MS:** How has the coverage permitted by our government differed from Vietnam to the Gulf War to the present?

**JW:** Well, I think over the years, the government has gotten, the Defense Department has gotten, much more cautious.

**MS:** Why did they get more cautious?

**JW:** Well, they thought they were burned in Vietnam. They felt they probably let too much reporter access, after a time, on the ground. After initially there being not enough coverage, then there was a lot of coverage, and it clearly affected American opinion. We went a number of years, then along came the Gulf War, many years later, in the early '90s. There was an enormous effort on the part of the Administration, the first Bush administration, the Pentagon, to control access.

There's not that desire, as we sit here today, in the, in the waning days, or at

least we'd like to believe, the waning days of the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. I think that the Administration went way beyond where it should have in denying press coverage. And I know that they were concerned about the safety of journalists [there]. They were very concerned about military secrets getting out. And I can understand that. Journalists don't want those secrets out either. We don't want, you know, information falling into the, the hands of the enemy. On the other hand, when you've got that many American military, young men and women over there, fighting, what they're doing is the business of the American people. The American people are paying taxes. The American people are funding this war. And there is a way, I think, a medium ground in there. Where the reporters can be there, the cameras can be there, covering what's going on. And at the same time, not jeopardize operations.

We already know that it has been an incredibly dangerous place for journalists. At one point late in the year 2001, there were more journalists who were killed than there were military, in hostile situations. So it is, it was, it remains, an inherently dangerous place for journalists, even to today. Journalists and journalist organizations have to have their eyes open when they go into these places. I don't believe anyone should be made to go in; it ought to be a voluntary assignment.

**This concludes the first part of Mort Silverstein's interview with Judy Woodruff. The next issue of *Television Quarterly* will continue with her pioneering and rise to prominence as a TV journalist.**

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