

Judy Woodruff: “If We Can’t Cover the News Aggressively Our Democracy Isn’t Worth Anything”

In the second part of her interview by Mort Silverstein of *Television in America* the CNN anchor talks about her career in TV journalism and her abiding faith in the medium.

Mort Silverstein: What ignited Judy Woodruff to want to be in journalism?

Judy Woodruff: There’s no one thing I can put my finger on. I grew up as an army brat; I was born in Oklahoma; my father was an enlisted man in the Army. Neither one of my parents went to college. My mother, in particular, wanted me to go to college, get an education and to have an independence that I think she felt she never had. That clearly was a driving force in my life.

Another influence in my life was the fact that my father was in the Army and we moved a lot. I went to seven different schools between kindergarten and 7th grade. So I was uprooted a lot; didn’t like moving around a lot. But along the way, I learned that there was a big world out there. And there was a lot to know about it. And by golly, I wanted to know a whole lot about it. And staying in one place was not going to be the way to do it. And so, even though I didn’t have somebody whispering over my shoulder, you know, hey, what about journalism, I always had this sense that

there was something out there that, that I didn't know about and I wanted to find out about.

MS: On Joan Konner's estimable PBS documentary *She Says: Women in the News*, you describe an early job interview at the ABC affiliate. While you were still a senior at Duke, taking a course in mass communications and politics. Do you know the interview I refer to?

JW: I remember it well.

MS: ...and how that ended?

JW: I do.

JW: I wrote the three TV stations in Atlanta. I went down to Atlanta my senior year, spring break. And interviewed with the news directors. The, two of 'em said we don't have any openings. The third one, the ABC affiliate news director, we sat down in the lobby. I remember this as clearly as if it were yesterday. This, this station on the end of Peachtree Street. In Atlanta. Overlooking a big parking lot. And we sat there and talked for 20 or 30 minutes about politics and about journalism and about Duke and about political science majors and all that, and I was interviewing to be his secretary. And as I got up to leave, I said, thank you I appreciate it. He said, you know,



Judy Woodruff

he just said, well, "you're hired." And I was thrilled, and I thanked him, and I got up to walk away, and as I'm walking away, toward the door, I'll never forget it, this voice behind me says, "besides, how could I not hire somebody with legs like yours?"

And here I was, 21 years old, and I just froze in place, and I thought, what do I say? Do I turn around and say, I don't want this job if that's your view. I said, oh. Well,

thanks, uh...I couldn't think of anything to say. I turned around, I looked at him, and...uh...you know...gulped, thanks. And walked out the door. Shaken, but thinking, well, I guess this is the way it is. You know, if you're a woman, there's a different standard. I should have been smart enough to realize that before, but nobody had ever been so blatant.

MS: You took the job?

JW: I took the job, I went to work right after graduation, two weeks later I went to work as a secretary in the News Department of the ABC affiliate in Atlanta. I made the coffee, I answered the phone, I did a little correspondence for the News Director, I cleaned the film – we were using film, not videotape. I kept the film in files, I organized all the files in the newsroom. And I talked to the reporters a lot about what they were doing .

But then an opening came up at the

CBS station and I went to talk to the news director, and he hired me. And a week later, I was covering the state legislature, the state capitol.

MS: Any good conflict of interest stories there? At the legislature?

JW: I'm sure there were a million. Did I cover some? Sure, I mean there were bankers who were voting on banking legislation and businesspeople who were voting on tax legislation, there were people who had interests in cement and road material firms who were voting on highway legislation, so sure, there were lots of conflicts. But it was a great training ground for me. It was a good place for me to cut my teeth and to learn about reporting. There's no better place to learn about politics than covering a state legislature.

MS: At NBC in 1975, you became a general assignment reporter, based in Atlanta. Was the atmosphere there any less sexist?

JW: Well, I started out at NBC pretty isolated in a sense. It was Judy Woodruff and [Kenlie Jones] at NBC, based in Atlanta, covering the entire Southeast. We covered 10 states, all the way to Louisiana, south to Florida, over to Arkansas and the Caribbean. So I even went to the Caribbean once to cover the execution, the hanging, of an American, who was caught in some drug deal down there. I didn't see the hanging, I was made to stand outside the prison, but I did spend a few days there and filed a few reports. I covered blackbird

kills in Kentucky; I covered red ant plagues in south Georgia; I covered alligator farms in Louisiana. For a while I thought of myself as a wildlife reporter. All that experience covering politics really didn't stand for much. But that was alright, because I stayed in touch with a lot of the people I knew, and when Jimmy Carter, who had been the governor – and I had covered him when he was governor started running for president – I had some contacts in his campaign.

MS: You're the NBC White House correspondent from 1977 to '82.

JW: Right. I wasn't really prepared to cover the White House when I got there. There's no question about it. I wanted it so badly. I wanted so badly to get to Washington. And when they offered me the White House, because Carter had been elected and I had covered him, and it was, in a way, it was a natural. I badly wanted to do it, but I really wasn't ready. I hadn't had the experience covering Washington. And so there was a lot of baptism by fire to what I did at the White House.

There were very few people on Carter's team who knew Washington, and that was part of his downfall...They didn't figure out how to work the media.

I'm sure I made a lot of mistakes. I learned that, that Washington was a much more competitive place than any place I had ever operated. And it was a fabulous learning experience. People like Hodding Carter had been here and worked in the Carter campaign and

of course had been in Mississippi. He was at the State Department as their spokesman.

JW: But I had to learn the Hill; I had to learn how people operated on the Hill; that the Hill was a great place for sources. I had to learn how to cultivate sources in the different agencies, how to cultivate, you know, people in, in the White House who never got their face on television but who were willing to talk to me on the telephone, or, you know, over lunch, or breakfast. I became a much better reporter after being there for six years.

MS: You interviewed both Carter and Reagan, of course, extensively. Can you give us an anecdote about each which would be emblematic of how they sought to have themselves portrayed, what their particular presidential spin was?

JW: Jimmy Carter came to the White House with a giant chip on his shoulder. He felt that he had been elected president... thinking that he had defied the Democratic establishment, that he had really done this on his own. And he brought his own team from Georgia; people like Jody Powell and Hamilton Jordan and Frank [Moore] and some other good ol' boys. Smart good ol' boys. But it was a very Georgia team. There were very few outsiders, very few people who knew Washington. And ultimately that was part of Carter's downfall, because you can't operate in this city, no matter how smart you are, unless you figure out where the levers of power are, who you need to deal with, who you've got to placate and

who you can ignore. And those are the kinds of outreach that they really didn't learn until almost two and a half, three years into their presidency, they finally did start bringing other people in. But they still didn't figure out how to work the media and how to parcel Carter out nearly as well as their successor, Ronald Reagan, did. And therefore, Jimmy Carter got some pretty awful press. People took advantage of that access. They wrote about the warts rather than about the beauty spots. And it was a very painful lesson for Jimmy Carter and the people around him. You know, they didn't understand, I think, until later...

When you got an interview with Ronald Reagan you were escorted before the royal presence of...the king!

He's been a remarkably successful ex-president. He really has set an example, I think.

Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, made his career as an actor, in the media, as somebody who loved being on camera. And yet once he got into the White House, his appearances were very carefully parceled out, calibrated. They only put him out when they knew they wanted to make an impression. He gave very few interviews. And when you did get an interview with him, you were escorted before the royal presence of...the king! I remember the first interview I had with him. They brought in Leslie Stahl with CBS... Sam Donaldson with ABC, the three of us, and I was with NBC. We were escorted into the library over in the first floor of the White House. The residence. And

it was as if we were in the presence of royalty. They said, you've only got 15 minutes and you're going to have to keep your distance, and you've got to be careful about this and that and the other, so we all went in, a little nervous. He immediately disarmed us by telling us funny stories about Hollywood and growing up.

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MS: Why do you leave NBC?

JW: I left to go to what was going to be *The MacNeil/Leher NewsHour*. The first was *The MacNeil/Lehrer Report*, a half-hour show. They were expanding to an hour. They wanted a Washington correspondent. And we started having conversations about it. I was intrigued by the idea of doing something more in depth and meatier on television. And I talked to a lot of people. I sought out the advice of all the people I respect. Most of them told me they thought I was crazy. A few people said it's a good idea. But the vast majority said don't do this. Why, how can you possibly give up a network to go to PBS, to go to this little-known program. But I had so much respect for what Robin MacNeil and Jim Lehrer were doing that I just had to do it. And so I made the great leap in 1983. Went over there, and I never looked back. It was a joyous ten years with *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, wonderful, two of the greatest journalists I've ever known in my life, Jim and Robin. They set the standard for journalism, as far as I'm

concerned. They're right up there in the pantheon of the greats. And I learned more than I'd ever learned before about what is good journalism and what's the responsibility of a journalist. And what's the role of television news. And clearly, it was a public-television mandate, it wasn't commercial, so the, the mandate was a little different. And we found that there was a very significant audience out there for what we did.

MS: But you move, finally, from one of the great joys of your life to

CNN. So how does that come about and why does it come about?

JW: Well, I'm at a dinner at the home of the late Katherine Graham, here in Washington, in December 1992. It was a month after the presidential election. And George Bush, the father, had been defeated by the former governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton. And the town was in an upheaval. This dinner was being given for the president-elect and his wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, at Mrs. Graham's house. And I was there at the dinner, had a wonderful time. I was at Mrs. Clinton's table. I was actually with her and with Katherine Graham. We all got up to say thank you and goodbye – my good friend Tom Johnson was moving in my direction, and he caught my eye, and I said hello, and Tom and I had known each other for years, we served together at Stanford on a journalism board. And he pulled me aside, and he said, would you ever consider leaving the *NewsHour*? And I said no, why do you ask? He said, well, I'm looking for, an anchor here in Washington and I think you'd be

great. And I said, well, I'm really not interested in leaving. And he said, well, why don't we talk about it, he said, why don't I give you a call. So we started having conversation, four months later, after a lot of conversations with Tom and talking to Ted Turner and others, I made the very tough decision, to give up the program that I loved and, really the family, at the *NewsHour* to come to CNN. Because Tom really persuaded me that it was an opportunity. He called it a repotting. He said we're taking you from a place where you, had a great run. But he said CNN is international; it's a place where you will have a larger presence. And it's a place where you can do the kind of journalism that you love. You can do breaking news, you can do, political reporting, I'm going to put you in *Inside Politics* and you do an international show called *World View*. And it was too enticing...It was a great professional opportunity. Still a painful move. It was hard for me...

MS: Let's talk about family life. You said, "I've always wanted to have a family, I've always wanted a career. I did not believe that in the beginning I had an inkling of how complicated that was going to turn out to be." How complicated was that?

JW: Those are the hardest decisions, as a mom or as a father. When are you going to stop working on a story to be with your kids. And be *with* them, because that's what family is, it's being with them, and being there for them. And I made the decision long ago I wasn't going to be there when they came home from school. But I did want to be there in the evenings.

And so I've pretty much drawn a line

around my professional life and I've told whoever I was working with, whether it was NBC or PBS or now CNN, that I don't want to travel extensively. I'll travel, but I can't be on the road all the time; I can't be a foreign correspondent. I can't live on the road. I can't work weekends. And I don't want to work nights. Now having said that, when a September 11th comes along, I've done all those things. But not permanently. And I'm now at a point where my family understands that I am going to work some nights and some weekends. But systematically I'm not going to do that.

MS: You said, "I think there are not more women in management for several reasons. Part of it has been that women have not wanted to make the sacrifice that's required. When you're a manager, you're always on call. But...I want to reserve a piece of my life for my family, for my children." What is the definition of a good manager? I think you've said that family is very important to making a better manager, in effect.

JW: To be a manager in the news business is about the hardest management job there is. Because you're not only part of the newsmaking decisions and you're part of deciding what is the news that you're going to put in a newspaper or on television, but you're also deciding how much time to devote, how much space to devote, to that story; what stories you're going to leave out.

You're also managing people. And journalists can be prickly characters. They're not always the easiest people to get along with. What is it about herding cats, and they all want to, they all have

egos, you know, that's what makes them great journalists, they should have ego. They all have independent ways. To get to be a great journalist, you've got to be independent.

So to gather these people together, to bring the best out of them, requires a great manager. And, and many times, we've seen managers in journalism come out of having been reporters themselves. Some of them get bumped up and get promoted, and they don't turn out to be such great managers. Others are magical. They do it very, very well.

I think that we're now in an era where family is something that managers are more conscious of. Even at the White House, President George W. Bush has said he wants some of his people to go home earlier in the week. Easier said than done. Same thing in journalism.

MS: What do you tell the young women at colleges, as undergraduates or as interns — if you're single, fight for equity? If you want to have a family, be prepared to make some adjustments? But still fight for equity and never compromise?

JW: There is no easy answer. I tell young women, just go into it with your eyes open. Try to marry somebody who's very supportive. If you decide to get married. Because you've got to have a supportive spouse, you've got to have somebody who's there, who's going to be with you all the way. Life is hard enough as it is, and if, when you get married, it needs to be somebody who's going to be like a partner, your best friend. Supporting you. Because there are going to be some really tough days.

MS: Do you still have the same passion for this business, for this profession, as you did when you were beginning?

JW: I have more passion for it. I really do. Much more than I ever dreamed. I am so passionate about how important it is that journalists go out every day and do the best job they can. And cover the story, wherever it is. Whether it's in Beirut or Baghdad or whether it's in New York City or Washington or Houston, Texas. That the American people are not well served unless there are journalists who are prepared to go out every day and work really hard to get as much information as they can. Not to take yes for an answer. Not to take no for an answer. But to keep asking questions and keep probing and keep making phone calls and keep pushing and keep pushing. Because that information, that free flow of information, is the lifeblood of this

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democracy. And we've never seen it the way we see today. We would not be the great country that we are, the democracy that we are, without the free press that we enjoy in the United States of America.

People can make fun of the press; they can deride the press; they can criticize the press; and we deserve all of it. But at the end of the day, if we can't get out and cover the news and cover it aggressively our democracy isn't worth anything.

So I'm more excited about journalism. And yes, we've been

through some rough patches, and yes, we're under siege today, because there's a lot of pressure on the bottom line, to make sure that the audiences are high and the viewers are way up there and they don't change the channel. And I'm aware of that, and that's the real

world that we operate in. But what really matters is that we keep at it, because our work matters. It matters that we report and that we try to get it right and that we try to stay balanced. Because the American people are counting on us.

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