

Ted Koppel Speaks Out

The back story of ABC's plan to replace him with David Letterman and other revelations.

By Morton Silverstein

There is one thing unmistakably clear about Ted Koppel: he does not suffer fools gladly.

On April 30, 2004, when *Nightline* announced that he was going to read the 721 names of those U.S. service men and women who had died in Iraq, despite Sinclair Broadcasting's pre-emption of the program that night on its eight ABC affiliates, Koppel and ABC News went forward, and closed with:

"The reading of those 721 names was neither intended to provoke opposition to the war, nor was it meant as an endorsement. Some of you doubt that. You are convinced that I am opposed to the war. I'm not, but that's beside the point. I am opposed to sustaining the illusion that war can be waged by the sacrifice of a few, without burdening the rest of us in any way. I oppose the notion that to be at war is to forfeit the right to question, criticize or debate our leaders' policies, or for that matter, the policies, of those who would like to become our leaders. *Nightline* will continue to do all of those things in the weeks and months to come."

Not that he needed backup, but Senator John McCain was among those

who vigorously protested to Sinclair, declaring its action "unpatriotic. I hope it meets with the public opprobrium it most certainly deserves."

In 1999, when a Serb who had known of a massacre of Kosovo civilians two days earlier was interviewed about it by Koppel, he mumbled, muttered and otherwise fumbled for a response. Said Koppel, who had seen the grave, asked the translator to tell him: "Look, I know when I get a direct answer and I know when I get bullshit, And this is bullshit." *Nightline* aired that night with the epithet intact.

Koppel has just announced that he will be leaving ABC when his contract expires next December. In 2002, when I interviewed him in Washington, where he kept three impatient members of Congress waiting while he fulfilled the interview, he was locked into yet another imbroglio. This time, the enemy was within, summoning up Walt Kelly's Pogo character, who famously declared: "We have seen the enemy-- and he is us."

ABC was seeking to replace *Nightline* with an entertainment show hosted by David Letterman. This is how our interview began.



Mort Silverstein: Back in March, 2002, devoted viewers of *Nightline* were concerned that after 22 years and thousands of broadcasts, they had seen the end of this distinguished ABC News series. Bill Carter, on *The New York Times* sounded the alarm, and the headline: “Koppel is the Odd Man Out as ABC Woos Letterman.” It went on to say that ABC, trying to challenge NBC and CBS for the sizeable revenue of late night entertainment, made a strong bid to lure David Letterman, the CBS star, in a move that would displace Ted Koppel and *Nightline*. The story quoted an unnamed executive – they’re always unnamed, aren’t they?

Ted Koppel: When they have something like that to say, yes.

MS: I quote, “the relevancy of *Nightline* just is not there anymore.” You responded a few days later in an op ed piece in the Times which many felt was remarkably constrained. Can you tell us now what was going on off camera between you and ABC News at that time, and the state of your own blood pressure? Being characterized as irrelevant is a phrase that doesn’t appear in any book of encomiums that I know.

TK: Fortunately, I’m blessed with very low blood pressure. I mean, it’s

under control. And it didn’t get out of control during that period either. And Bill Carter’s story was exceptionally accurate in that the reasons that ABC had for doing that in the first place were purely economic. And I had no trouble with that. I had no illusions; as I said in that same op ed, I know I’m not working for a charitable organization. It’s a business. I know why they had made a lot on *Nightline* over the past 22 years, and continue to make a reasonable amount of money on *Nightline*. They believed that they could make a great deal more by bringing David Letterman over to ABC. I understand that; I have no problem with that. But I said it was gratuitous for that still unnamed executive to say what he or she did. And that got my Irish up a little bit. So I felt that it was important that if the Letterman thing did not go through, and if *Nightline* was to stay on ABC, that very senior representatives of this organization publicly express what I hoped would be their real view about *Nightline*. Which they did. And we’re back to status quo ante.

MS: Where do we stand right now? Is there a new commitment?

TK: Yes.

MS: Between you and ABC, which would satisfy you temporarily?

TK: It satisfies me. Look. I mean, one of the reasons that it was understandably difficult for them to give a public commitment of that kind is that as you well know, as someone who’s spent a lot of your life in, in television, networks don’t normally give commitments to television programs.

Indeed, they never give commitments to television programs. So ironically, we're in a better position now than we were in January or February of this year. As we discovered at the time, our, our life span could have been as brief as a few more weeks. Now we have a guarantee of significantly longer than that.

MS: How much longer?

TK: (laughing) None of your business.

MS: I'd like to take a long dissolve, to childhood years. Growing up in England during the 1940s, and to the time you were 13. Who was the young Ted Koppel? And who were your parents, friends, mentors? What kind of kid were you?

TK: Well, at age 13, or at least in the years leading up to 13, you tend not to have many mentors outside your own family. I had spent three years in an English boarding school, by the time we came over to the United States. My parents were German Jewish refugees, who had fled Hitler in the late '30s. I was born in England. My life really begins after I came to the United States. That's when I truly began to enjoy myself.

MS: In your book, "Off Camera Ted Koppel: Private Thoughts Made Public," you remembered fellow students in England sending you to Coventry, "a form of loneliness," you said, "that is both painful and conducive to introspection." What was that about?

TK: My parents were back in

Germany at the time. My father was trying to reacquire some of the things that the Nazis had taken away from him, including a home and a factory. And they did not want me, for obvious reasons, to be going to school in Germany, and so I went to boarding school in England. And I made the mistake of coming back from one vacation with some little Shuco toy cars. And I was bragging about those cars. And pointing out that I thought they were infinitely superior to the English Dinky Cars.

Most Americans have much more than anybody else in any other country in the world.

This was only six years after the end of the Second World War. I think quite understandably my fellow students there didn't take too kindly to this kid coming back from Germany and saying that the Germans have got better cars than the Brits.

MS: What is Coventry?

TK: Coventry means nobody talks to you. I think I was in Coventry for about two weeks. When you're that age, two weeks is a long time, not to have anybody talk to you.

MS: And who determines when Coventry is over?

TK: Those who impose it. I mean, there's no point in trying to end it yourself. In fact, the more you try to end it, the longer it's going to last.

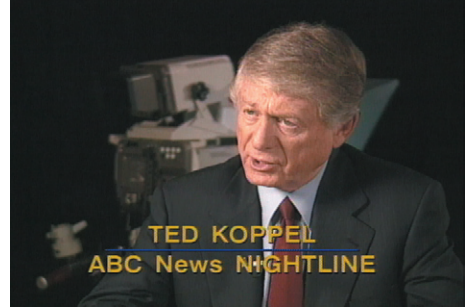
MS: At 13 in the Jewish faith, the customary phrase is that you've become a man. This is the year when you and your family come to the United States. Did you feel that you were at least on the path of what is known as manhood? Starting life in a new culture is a daunting task for anyone.

TK: This is, and has been for many, many years, an extraordinarily blessed country. Most Americans have much more than anybody else in any other country of the world. Even our lower middle class is wealthier, in many respects, than people who are considered to be quite well off in a lot of other countries. And some of that reaches the point of wretched excess. I remember my father giving me some money to buy the *Sunday Times*. I went to a local newsstand and the vendor gave it to me, and I said no, I only need one copy. And he said that is one copy. Well, as people in New York well know, and as people around the country may not appreciate, a *New York Times*, in New York, on a Sunday, probably weighs six or seven pounds. The advertising alone is several hundred pages. I had never seen a newspaper like that before.

MS: It'll give you tennis elbow.

TK: It sure will. I remember during the first week we were in the States, my mother coming in to find me sitting on the hotel bed. And in those days, they didn't have television in the rooms, but they did have radios. And I'd just been listening to the radio, and she found me, she found me crying on the bed, and she said what's the matter? And I said I can't, can't believe what kind of a country we've come to here. And she

said what do you mean? And I had just heard an ad for Brioschi. And I still remember the jingle. It was "Eat too Much, Drink Too Much, try Brioschi, try Brioschi."



By then it would have been eight years after the end of the Second World War. We had rationing in England for some commodities until 1952. I remember sugar, for example, and candy were rationed until 1952. So I had just left a country where there was still a rationing. And had just come to a country where the only thing that people could think to do, if they had eaten too much or drunk too much, was to take some kind of a medicine for it. And I said, why don't they just eat less? Or drink less. Then they won't get upset stomachs. I mean, that seemed like a much simpler solution, and would have saved a lot of money all around. But I quickly adapted. I have early memories, although I can't, as I look back on it now, I can't have paid too much attention to it, but it clearly had an impact. I have early memories of my father listening to Edward R. Murrow on the BBC. As you know, he was over there for CBS Radio, but his broadcasts were considered to be of such propaganda value to the British people, who were going through a very, very bad time, obviously, that many of them were rebroadcast on the

BBC. And my father listened to these broadcasts avidly.

Koppel, while in London, as a pre-teenager, had decided to become a journalist. His influence, he told us, was listening to Edward R. Murrow on the BBC. We asked about first jobs in his years after college.

TK: I came out of Stanford in 1962, with a masters degree, and thought that *The New York Times* would just be tripping all over itself to want to hire me. And indeed they would. They were willing to hire me, as a copyboy. Which is what desk assistants were called in those days. And it would have been at \$60 a week. It wasn't a lot of money, even back in 1962, but I was content to do that. And then I had a conversation with one of the editors, and I said, well, tell me, how long do you think it'll be before I can rise from being a copyboy to actually writing something? And he said, if you're very good, it'll be three years. I was just on the verge of getting married. And my wife was a New York City schoolteacher at that time. And I really didn't see how I was going to make it on \$60 a week with a family. So I took this job at WMCA, where they paid me the princely sum of \$90 a week. And that was a good learning experience. There were some terrific reporters at that station. One of them, a fellow by the name of Danny Meenan, was probably about as good a, a police reporter as any around, and Danny took me under his wing, and the news director at the time was a fellow by the name of Ken Cornell. New Yorkers will probably have heard his daughter, Irene Cornell, on WCBS many, many times over the past 40 years.

I was quite content at WMCA. But then one day I was sent to cover a Neo-Nazi rally in Yorkville. I did a pretty good interview with the head Nazi. In which he, in his speech, had denounced the "domination" of President Kennedy's Cabinet by "all these Jews." And I said, which of the many Jews on President Kennedy's Cabinet did you have in mind? Did you have the Jew, Robert McNamara, in mind? Or was it Dean Rusk? Or were you thinking perhaps of his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy?

Soon after that interview the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists called up management at WMCA and said if he had me on the air, he's got to be a member of AFTRA. And they came back to me and said you've got to join the union. And I said that's, that's fine, I'll be happy to do that. What do I have to do? Well, it was simple. I had to pay \$350 initiation fee and I was a member. Now, that was a month's salary, before taxes. But I paid it. And then after, my new union came back and said, that's fine, but if you're going to have him on the air, you've got to pay him union scale. And that would have been, at the time, roughly a doubling, maybe more, of my salary. And WMCA said well, let's see: the option is, we have him on the air and we have to pay him a couple of hundred bucks. Or, we don't have him on the air and we don't have to pay him anything. So they took me off the air. So now I was an AFTRA member; I was out \$350 and I couldn't get on the air. So that's when I started looking rather more seriously for a new job, and ultimately found this job with ABC.

MS: You sent out your bio, your resume...

TK: No. Actually one of the WMCA Good Guys, as they were then called, a DJ by the name of Jim Harriet, told me that had heard that ABC Radio was starting a new broadcast called *The Flair Reports*. And he said I think they're still looking for a couple of guys. Why don't you go over and audition? So I did. And I did rather well. I mean, they said, you sound good, we like your writing. The only problem is you're 23 years old. I mean, we can't possibly hire you as an ABC correspondent. And I said, well, this is radio. Nobody's going to know. Unless you introduce me every day by saying, and now here's 23-year-old Ted Koppel, why should they know? And they said no, we just can't.

But they did offer me a job as a news writer. At \$175 a week. Which seemed like an awful lot of money. But I turned them down. And said that's not the job I applied for, and I think I'm qualified for that on-air job, and that's the job I want. And I went home – by then I was married and we had a baby on the way. And I said to my wife, I think I just blew it. I think I just blew a \$175-dollar-a-week job. But she was very supportive, and said look, you did what you thought was the right thing. And three days later, the producer called up and said, alright, we've thought it over. Come on over. And that job paid \$270 a week. Well, I've made bigger salaries in the years since then, but none ever seemed bigger than that one.

MS: You variously worked as an anchor or foreign and domestic

correspondent and bureau chief; you were ABC News Hong Kong bureau chief, from 1971 covering stories from Vietnam to Australia. Vietnam: did you believe Vietnam to be a, a tragic, futile endeavor, as many did, and if so, if you did, when did you make this perception?

VIETNAM: I didn't think that was a war that could be won.

TK: Well, I went to Vietnam for the first time in January of 1967. I went for a year, and then I came back in late '67; spent '68 in the States covering Central and Latin America; covering civil rights stories in, in the South here; and then in '69 I was sent out to be bureau chief in Hong Kong.

I think that my perception of Vietnam was very much influenced by an interview that I did in 1964 with three colleagues: David Halberstam, who was then working for *The New York Times*; Neil Sheehan, who was then the UPI correspondent; and Malcolm Brown, who was the Associated Press correspondent. All of them covering Vietnam, and they were all back, and I did a one-hour radio documentary with the three of them on what was then still very much an evolving war in Vietnam. And much of what they told me then turned out to be absolutely true, and they had a much clearer vision, I think, of what was happening in Vietnam and what was going to happen. And I found, when I went to Vietnam myself in, in early '67, I found myself discovering many of the things that they had discovered a couple of years earlier. So from mid-'67 on, I had

very few illusions about Vietnam or that ultimately the United States would, would have to withdraw. I didn't think that was a war that could be won.

MS: How to regard the Sixties? That was a helluva time to be in television, to be a journalist.

TK: The interesting thing is, I missed a lot of the Sixties, because I was overseas. I was a war correspondent in those days. I was in the United States in 1968. And I covered Latin America; covered Central America; covered the civil rights story; and then was assigned in the summer of '68 to the Nixon campaign, which I covered through the election. And thought I was going to be, when he won, I thought I was going to become ABC's White House correspondent. And I was called in by the then-president, Bill Sheehan, who said look, you've done a terrific job, and I'm going to give it to straight: there's nothing wrong with your reporting. But you're 28 years old. And you look about 21. I just can't put you in the White House; you're just too young. You need some more seasoning. But I will give you the job as Southeast Asian bureau chief, if you're willing to go back out to Hong Kong.

My wife and kids had been living in Hong Kong when I was in Vietnam. And we were all very fond of Hong Kong, loved living out there. I was just beginning to feel, after a year in Vietnam, that I knew what it was about. So I was actually kind of eager to go back and, and resume covering that story. But I was there then for '69, '70, and part of '71. So I missed a lot of the

turbulent Sixties.

MS: On November 4th, 1979, during Jimmy Carter's presidency, a group of armed men stormed the American Embassy in Tehran and took, I think it was 65 employees, hostage. Where were you on that Sunday?

TK: I was home. Got a call from the desk, and they said, look, a bunch of radical students have seized the U.S. Embassy, and we'd like you to come in. Do a story. And what few people remember now is that just a few months previous, a bunch of radical students had seized the embassy, or had tried to. And the then-ambassador had come out, talked to them, sent them home, and nothing had happened. It was Sunday, I didn't want to go in. And I said, I think this thing will be over before I get into the State Department, so why don't you just forget about it. And the guy on the desk said no, we really think, you know, there's nothin' much else going on today. We need you to come in and do that story.

Roone was sort of a guerilla fighter of network bureaucracy.

And as history was to prove, I was right. It didn't last long at all; just 444 days.

MS: Roone Arledge was then president of News, as well as Sports. He was beseeching the network to an open-ended late night time slot, a), and b), particularly a crisis which, as we [said], couldn't last for a couple of days or whatever.

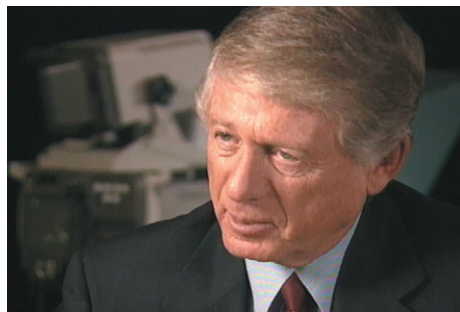
TK: Sure. But, Roone wasn't the kind to "beseech." Roone was smarter

than that. He had actually wanted a one-hour newscast, at 6:30 in the evening. He wanted the 6:30 to 7:30 slot. And there was no way that the affiliates were going to give up that valuable 7 to 7:30 time slot, in which they could run syndicated programming and make a ton of money. But Roone was sort of a guerilla fighter of network bureaucracy. And he had it in mind that if he couldn't get that hour broadcast consecutively, then he would simply take half an hour in the early evening and try to get half an hour late at night. And for some months already, he had been setting this up in the news division, that whenever there was a major event that happened, he would seize that half hour, at 11:30 at night. And do a special. I remember we did a special when Elvis Presley died; we did a couple of specials when the Pope came to visit; there were any number of other stories. But what he was really looking for was a story with legs, a story that would last.

The hostages were taken on November 4th. It was probably four days later when Roone said, we're gonna do a, a late-night special on this. And we did a late night special on the 8th, and the 9th, and the 10th, and the 11th, and the 12th, and the 15th and the 20th and the 25th. And I remember one day getting on the phone with him and saying, Roone, you know, there is nothing happening today. We got nothing to say tonight. We shouldn't be doing this special tonight. He said, do it anyway. Tell me what an ayatollah is. Tell me what the difference is between a, a Shi'ite and a Sunni Muslim. I don't care what you do. Just put on a half hour.

And what he was really doing was he

had seized that time period. And he wasn't going let it go again. And the hostage crisis went on and on and on, and ABC was losing a ton of money, because these were all specials. And they couldn't sell advertising on these specials. They had to declare their intention to do a regularly scheduled program before they could sell it. And that is how *Nightline* was born. In March of 1980.



MS: The first *Nightline* featured an exchange between the wife of one of the hostages and an Iranian diplomat.

TK: Yeah. Dorothea Morefield was the woman. Very elegant and smart and tough. And she took this guy apart. She was very rough with him.

MS: In his review of that first episode, Tom Shales, of the *Washington Post* called the show "cheaply theatrical. Mawkish and self-promotional. Neo-news. Non-news. Pseudo news. A sugar news substitute. News dressed up in a clown's suit and paraded in the center ring." How did you and your staff react to that kind of notice?

TK: Oh, I have learned over the years not to complain. Certainly to television critics. But I called Tom, and I said, I thought that was a cheap

shot. It didn't even give us a chance to get off the ground. I mean that's our first program of what we hope is gonna be a permanent series. And I think, in all fairness, you owe it to us to give it another look. And Tom, who actually is a very sensitive guy and a very decent guy, promised that he would do that. And I think about five or six months later, he came back with a rave review. It was one of the nicest reviews I've ever had. I didn't have any complaint about what he had to say; I was just concerned about the timing. You've got to give it

at least a few nights.

MS: Shales's next review is nine months after that first review, he was now writing, "*Nightline* represents the most successful programming initiative in ABC News history. What makes *Nightline* click is Koppel's bullseye interviewing style: a verbal and rhetorical combination of Sugar Ray Leonard and Baryshnikov. The succession of jabs, rejoinders, and judicious to delicious interruptions. Koppel a cappella."

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