

Reuven Frank: An Appreciation

Reuven Frank did not become the President of NBC News because he wanted to. He did it because he had to. | **By Richard C. Wald**

I tall started in 1967. Julian Goodman, who ran the News division on a daily basis, was promoted in the largest single jump in television corporate history from Executive Vice President, News, to President of NBC. Bill McAndrew, the head of NBC News was ill and they both put the arm on Reuven to take on the job of executive vice president “just for a few months.” He was perfectly happy to stay forever as Executive Producer of *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. They promised he could go back.

Then the world blew up.

Bill McAndrew died soon after, in 1968, the year of Lyndon Johnson’s decision not to run, campus riots, Vietnam protests, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, with a Presidential election thrown in. Reuven was forced into staying on as President of NBC News.

It gave him enormous clout for a while. Once, in 1968, when he had booked an hour to explain the post-Johnson political landscape, the head of the entertainment division came to tell him that a beer company wanted the same hour and the network was

going to give it to them. Reuven just stared at the man and the five assistants who came with him. He never said a word as they all explained how good it would be for the company. Then they looked at him. He looked back. They went over the arguments again. He said nothing. Finally, the entertainment guy got up and led his troops out saying, “God damn it, you are not a company man! There will be consequences.”

And he was right. After a while, the consequence was that the head of the entertainment division went away but News, and Reuven, stayed.

The man who began his career at NBC watching newsreel cameramen and editors plying their craft in a warehouse of a building on 125th Street, established many of the rules we all played by. He didn’t listen to fools but he did listen to everyone who worked for him.

He never intended to be in broadcasting. He was born in Canada in 1920 and the bachelor’s degree he ultimately got (at City College) was in social science. In World War II he rose to the rank of sergeant and he secretly liked it. But after he graduated from

the Columbia University School of Journalism, he went into newspapers. As he told the story, the city editor of the Newark (N.J.) *Evening News* hired him because Reuven's student-written stories were double spaced. The city editor liked double-spacing. The only reason he left newspapering was because he got married to Berenice and wanted a few more nice things. A friend in the then brand-new television-news business offered him a job that paid about \$20 a week more than *The Evening News*.

But all the preceding is merely biography. Once at NBC, he became Reuven Frank. It was the era of formation, when the people in it were figuring out how it should work. His memo in 1963, written when Huntley-Brinkley went from 15 minutes to a half hour, fixed little things like how you should do reverse shots and cutaways and big things like the point of television (it's the pictures) and its power: "[It] is not in the transmission of information but in the transmission of experience."

He loved a good narrative in pictures and it may be that the thing of which he was proudest was "The Tunnel," the only documentary ever to win both an Oscar and an Emmy. It was about a group of 59 determined East Berliners escaping into the west. The State Department tried to kill it. Advertisers ran for the hills. And NBC put it on, to its glory and its growth.

His was a career of constant achievement. He invented the system of sub-control rooms for conventions (he said he saw it first on an aircraft carrier) that controlled Chet Huntley and David Brinkley and John Chancellor and Frank McGee and Sander Vanocur and Edwin Newman as they showed

America how to report politics on the air. One night in 1968, their coverage of the Democratic convention got more viewers than everything else on ABC and CBS combined and set back Walter Cronkite's career for years.

He didn't stay as President of NBC News forever. He left in 1973. I was his successor. He came back again in 1982 for two years, when NBC was in trouble again. By that time he had invented *Weekend* and *Overnight*, appointed Tom Brokaw as the anchor of what was now called *NBC Nightly News* and taught yet another generation of journalists how to make a narrative structure out of pictures and not let the words get in the way. He is the guy who, in 1963, before Tom Wolfe and a younger generation went on about The New Journalism, told his troops that they had to borrow the techniques of fiction to make the world of fact interesting and valuable to a mass audience.

When he retired, he wrote a book, *Out of Thin Air*. He wrote perceptive and fascinating columns for *The New Leader*. He did a little lecturing. He collected honors. He kept in touch with the people in broadcasting who mattered to him. And he remembered to be outraged by attempts to stifle speech.

His sons, Peter and James, spoke clearly and well at his funeral and they recalled his humor. He would have liked that. And in the audience were three generations of journalists to whom he had listened. He would have liked that, too.

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