

Why Tom Brokaw Quit

NBC Nightly News ex-anchor illuminates his career and explains why he changed direction.

By Mort Silverstein

Tom Brokaw, like all the anchors who preceded or succeeded him, knows what a red light on a camera means: the television industry's metaphor for *begin*. That was the case for him, not at an *NBC Nightly News* studio, where he anchored from 1983 to 2005, but in his office at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, where he was now being invaded by a crew intent upon an interview for the Steven Scheuer archives, seen on public television: *Television in America*. Brokaw graciously asked that our *red light* must go on promptly since he was soon off to Pakistan to report on the consequences of a February 2006 earthquake for his new series: *Tom Brokaw Reports*. Excerpts from the interview follow.

MORT SILVERSTEIN: I'd like your comments as a former White House correspondent on how the media itself has recently taken a beating, and then fought back, since the issue was one of credibility. I refer to the government using media, often fake media, especially in Iraq, to create and pay for some Iraqis to write happy news about the post-Saddam government. It's often said that in war, truth is the first casualty.

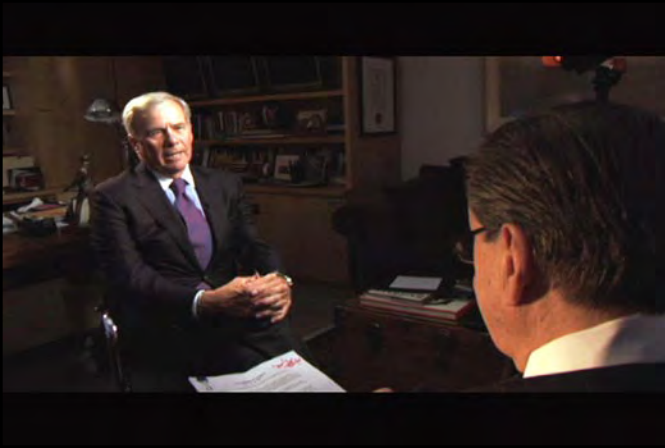
TOM BROKAW: Well, I think it was very important that all of that was disclosed. The fact of the matter is, I don't think it had much of an impact on news coverage there or here. The commentators here that were in the employ of various departments of this administration were going to say nice things about [their clients] whether they were paid or not. But you've got to be constantly vigilant about what administrations are up to.

People forget that the great champion of American liberties, Franklin Roosevelt, didn't like it very much when the truth was told about what was going on. Reporters felt lots of restrictions in those days on war reporting; correspondents who appeared in uniform had a lot of their material censored before it got back. There was a lot of self-censorship that went on. There's a much more robust environment now.

MS: One of your best-known books, *The Greatest Generation*, is written about and told, in eloquent oral history, by the veterans of World War II themselves. Also eloquent at that time—and presumably not eviscerated by censors—were such correspondents as Ernie Pyle and others

in Europe, and Richard Tregaskis, whose *Guadalcanal Diary* made even more vivid the Pacific War, as did ultimately John Hersey's article for *The New Yorker*, and then a book, *Hiroshima*. What distinctions do you make in the coverage and the freedom, or lack of it, given reporters in World War II with those of Vietnam and today's so-called embedded correspondents in Iraq?

more revealing, much more candid than anything that happened in World War II or in Korea. Ernie Pyle was a wonderful war correspondent. But the people that I've talked to say: You know, Ernie Pyle told feel-good stories. They were stories about the GI. But he didn't talk about the atrocities that were committed, mostly by the other side, but occasionally by Americans as well. War is a terribly vicious, violent, god-awful business. And the public deserves to know that. It should not be sugarcoated.



MS: [after you left the anchor chair] in July 2005, you're doing *Tom Brokaw Reports*. The title of the documentary was "Deep Throat: The Full Story," referring to Woodward and Bernstein's key informant. It aired on NBC's *Dateline*,

TB: I think far too much was made of the embedded correspondent being potentially compromised. We monitor that very carefully. And they told the truth. And it was a wide range of reporting coming out of there [Iraq]: *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, Michael Kelly died while he was embedded. We lost a guy, David Bloom, one of our most promising young correspondents. He wasn't pulling his punches. His stuff was not being sent through some kind of a military filter before it got here.

We've always been extraordinarily careful about troop movement; tipping plans. If American forces are going to be put unduly in harm's way by our reporting, we're generally inclined to hold back. But the war reporting, from Vietnam on, was much more aggressive, much

then on Sundance. Have you ever had a similar situation, where, as did Woodward and Bernstein, you had to reveal to a news division president a source whose identity you had pledged to protect?

TB: I've never had that. I remember a couple of instances in where I was told to go get a second source; that one source was not going to be good enough. Bob and Carl really invented the two-source rule with Ben Bradlee. A lot of the time, during Watergate, I'd have a very, very good source, who would tell me some things that I was sure were irrefutable. But they were powerful. And so the editors up here would say, "Go get us a second source on that. Let's just be sure."

Sometimes I wasn't very happy about it, because I was on deadline, I knew, I was confident about the source that I had.

But I would find ways to get it reinforced by a second person in some way.

And there are a lot of ways of doing that, you know, I'd call the second source, I didn't ask him what he or she knew. I would say something to the effect: Isn't it amazing? And they wouldn't know where I'd gotten it, and they'd say, yeah, how did you find out about that? And then I'd have my second source, and I'd go with the story.

MS: Another prime-time documentary, more in the tradition of *The Greatest Generation*, was your "To War and Back." It's a remarkable story, since it's centered on seven childhood friends who grew up in Glens Falls, New York, and together served in Iraq. Six survived; one did not.

Critic Alessandra Stanley of *The New York Times* wrote: "Often longer news features about the war are so overpackaged and slickly produced that they seem more like movies than real life. 'To War and Back' is a cinematically shaped documentary that threads a narrative from basic training to post-traumatic stress disorder. It never steps over the line into show business."

Yet the greatest praise came from someone at NBC, who once supported you as sole anchor of *The Nightly News*, someone we lost just recently. You heard from him in December. Can you tell us about that?

TB: After "To War and Back" was on the air, the next day I opened up my e-mail. And Reuven Frank, who was the founding father of NBC News—the

first executive producer of, of *Huntley-Brinkley*; the man who really invented the new form of covering election nights and conventions and other matters, and a very sharp-witted critic, in the best sense of the word, of what goes on the air—said, "Dear Tom: Stunning. Reuven."

It was a very gratifying message to have gotten from Reuven [Frank, late NBC News chief]. He was never one who succumbed. He was quick to praise that which was worthy. But he also had a keen eye about those things that could be improved.

MS: He could be a tough city editor, too...



TB: Oh, he was. I know that.

MS: You resigned your anchor seat on December 1st, 2004. Why did you leave? Was it a mandatory age requirement? You're still a kid. Broader career horizons? You certainly weren't chair-bound or sedentary at 30 Rock. You were globetrotting, and reporting from afar. Doesn't the Jack Benny age of 39 fit with the networks' demographic aspirations anymore?

TB: Right before 9/11, I thought about

leaving. But I knew that I couldn't leave after that happened. I wanted to see it through. I wanted to have more time to think about fewer things. I wanted to give a new generation a chance, as I'd had an opportunity. It wasn't entirely altruistic. I have a lot of interests outside the television news business. Most of them require a certain amount of sound physical health. And I wanted to be able to go do them while I still had my legs.

MS: Can you tell us what some of them are?

TB: One of the things I did was to go down to Patagonia in southern Chile right after I left *Nightly News*, and went fly fishing; went to New Zealand to go fly fishing, in the middle of what turned out to be sweeps. I couldn't have done that before. I spent more time skiing. Mostly I could pick and choose when I wanted to go.

People forget that Walter Cronkite used to go sailing for two months in the summertime, and John Chancellor would take off six weeks in the summertime. I would fill in for him. Those days are gone for anchors now. Brian Williams, my successor, had the tsunami, the death of the Pope; Katrina. I presciently had given him a sleeping bag when I left *Nightly News*, saying, you're going to need this more than you may realize. And it got a lot of workout in the first year.

If I had been still sitting in that chair, I would have been happy to go to those places. But I wouldn't have been able to go to New Zealand; I wouldn't have been able to go to Chile; I wouldn't have been able to spend as much time on my ranch in Montana as I did this summer. And mostly, I would not have

been able to spend as much time with my grandchildren as I did.

MS: Can you remember for us your family, your parents, your friends, your early influences or mentors; what you listened to on the radio? Ted Koppel told us in an interview that upon hearing Edward R. Murrow reporting on the Blitz, he knew what he wanted to be, to do, in his life.

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TB: Those were simpler times. And there were not a lot of diversions, like video games. We didn't even have television where

I lived [South Dakota], it was such a remote part of the world. And there was this intimacy about radio. We only had one radio set in the house, so we'd all gather around it. And before I'd go to bed at night, the 10 o'clock news would come on. And one of my all-time favorite newscasters was Whitey Larson, from WNEX in Sioux City, Iowa, who would say: "Well, ladies, it's gonna snow tomorrow, but it won't be the shovelin' kind, so you'll be able to do the wash in the morning, and probably get it out. But get it out before noon, because it's gonna get wet in the afternoon." And that's how he would open a newscast.

MS: In that same autobiographical book, you quote author Kathleen Norris about what you call "the contradictions and tensions in the Dakota [cultures]," which she defines as, "between hospitality and insularity; between change and inertia, between hope and despair; between open hearts and closed minds."

TB: What really resonated with me was

that last phrase, “open hearts and closed minds.” The people who moved to the Great Plains as far out west as where I lived, in the Dakotas, were mostly pretty isolationist. They were, I wouldn’t say they were asocial, or antisocial. But that was not the big part of their lives. The big part of their lives was going out and doing hard work, all day, every day, and forming certain opinions and values in their lives.

The closed mind thing was always a little hard growing up. If you didn’t adhere to a kind of ritualistic pattern in your community, there was not a lot of tolerance for you.

MS: And “open hearts”?

TB: My parents both taught me tolerance, at an early age. And my dad, in part because he’d not been expected to succeed in life; he was the last of 10 children in a very rough, environment., and he had fought against the stereotype that had been imposed on him and had done well.

And my mother, who was really educated much beyond her secondary education, by her own design, she constantly emphasized to us the idea that you have to explore new ideas; your mind must be open to new people, and not to make judgments about, just what you see. Because others see it one way, you don’t have to see it that way as well.

MS: I’d like you to take us with you on that journey from Yankton, South Dakota, to NBC. I noted your earliest job in broadcasting was at station KYNT.

What did you do at that station?

TB: At KYNT, when I was 15 years old, I did a little bit of everything. I had a teenage record show in the evening.

After basketball practice, I read the news, mostly because the disc-jockey mentor that I had was a little bit lazy, and he’d, give me lots of liberty.

I was fascinated, not just by the sound of my own voice, but by the reach of this very small radio station. It was an exciting time in American teenage music. Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino; they were all coming online at that time. Bo Diddley. It was no longer my parents’ music. Among the girls in town, I was kind of a big deal, because I was a disk jockey playing their favorite music.

MS: How and why do you get to NBC News, which was, at KNBC in Los Angeles?

TB: I got to NBC in part because in those days, once you got into a network system, you pretty much stayed there. If I’d gone to work for a CBS affiliate at a young age, I might have ended up at CBS News. But I went to work at KGIB in Sioux City, which is an NBC affiliate.

And when I graduated from college, the news director there handed me off, as it were, to the NBC affiliate in Omaha. While I was working there, the NBC affiliate in Atlanta heard about me, and asked for a tape, and then decided to hire me.

So I got to Atlanta, at age 25, to become the 11 o’clock anchorman. I’m racing around the South in the middle of the

night, covering the civil rights stories; until the network can get somebody there. Richard Valeriani, or whoever happened to be on the way. And then they would take my material, and put it on *Huntley/Brinkley*, or on the *Today Show*, or on radio.

After about eight months of that, NBC thought, we're paying him all this extra money to go do this, and the station is paying. Why don't we just hire him and take him out to Los Angeles and, and let him start?

I said, I really didn't want to go to Los Angeles. I always wanted to be a Washington correspondent. I was also very happy in Atlanta.

And then they made the deal richer and more advantageous to me, so I went to Los Angeles, and spent seven years in California, working at KNBC, but also working for the network. I did a fair amount of feeds to *Huntley/Brinkley*, before Chet left and to the *Today Show*.

It was an odd, pilgrimage. I left Los Angeles to go to the White House. Dick [Wald] and Bob [Mulholland] decided I should [be there]. In 1972, at the convention in Miami, I had scored a lot of exclusives, reporting from the floor. Even though I wasn't one of the floor correspondents, I had very good political contacts. And at the end of the [convention] week, Chancellor said to me: "It's time for you to give up that good life in California and come back East and be a grownup." That was his very phrase.

And then Watergate develops. Dan Rather is doing extremely well for CBS, and they decided they wanted to throw fresh young meat into the grinder, I

guess, and so they said, why don't you come to Washington; be our White House correspondent; and cover Watergate?

I didn't have any reservations about taking on Dan. But I knew what I was up against. He was a very formidable reporter. But I knew the Nixon crowd from the California days, and I thought, this is a story that's so big and it's breaking out in so many directions that if you're just skillful as a reporter, you should be able to compete.

I'm so grateful I did that, because it was the single best reporting job anybody could have. This is constitutional crisis of the first magnitude. First president ever to resign. High drama, every day. Lots of domestic and extraordinarily important international considerations. And I was in the middle of it.



While I'm doing all of that, Barbara Walters leaves the *Today Show*. And they say, well, why don't you come up and substitute for a week? So I do. And it goes very well, and they said, well, would you consider doing the *Today Show*?

And I said, do I have to do commercials?

And they said, yes, that was part of the requirement in those days.

And I said, no, no way. And I don't want to leave Washington. I love what I'm doing down here.

Barbara leaves; and they decide, at the

end of Barbara's departure that they really did need to make some more change, and they came to me and Dick [Wald] said you don't have any choice this time.

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In our next issue, Tom Brokaw tells Mort Silverstein about the rest of his career at NBC – who his role models were, what he really thought about the Presidents he interviewed, from Nixon to Carter to Reagan to Clinton. He also gives us his take on the history of network evening news, as well as his prophesies on its chance of survival.

Morton Silverstein is an eight-time Emmy Award documentary filmmaker whose television career began with *Nightbeat* with Mike Wallace and continued at all the networks, with a stint as public-affairs director for the CBS flagship station WCBS-TV New York. At National Educational Television (1963-72) he produced *Banks and the Poor*, *What Harvest for the Reaper*, *The Poor Pay More* and *Justice and the Poor*, among many other investigative reports. He is today Senior Writer/Producer at the Independent Production Fund where with Executive Producer Alvin H. Perlmutter he continues to produce for Steven H. Scheuer *Television in America: An Autobiography*, which can be seen on many public television stations.