

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

NORMAN LEAR

*THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE*

KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**NORMAN LEAR**

**Television Writer and Producer**

**February 07, 2017**

Interviewed by: John Maggio

**Total Running Time: 26 minutes and 30 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Norman Lear

Screenwriter and Producer

## **Forming a friendship with Ben Bradlee**

00:00:14:00

NORMAN LEAR:

In 94 years, that could be the loveliest compliment I've ever received, from Ben Bradlee, that he looked forward to a phone call from me and would talk to me longer than he might talk to those glorious men who were his close friends, all gone. We could have started with, "How's Quinn? How's Ben?" Ben, my son, and, "How's Sally? How's Lyn?" I don't know. I don't remember having another male friend I thought more of as a buddy. I don't even know what buddy means, but I know what it feels like.

**Ben Bradlee's charisma**

00:01:03:00

NORMAN LEAR:

To start with, everybody talked about that. You know, it was perfectly okay to talk, for the women to talk about Ben that way, for couples to talk about him that way, for anyone to talk to Sally about Ben that way. I mean, this voice, and that bearing, and who he was as a man, and as a citizen, and a celebrity. All of those things were male as could be, and that and a certain kind of charm, I think, made him as attractive a male to a woman.

**Ben Bradlee's persona**

00:01:54:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Well, I can't remember his full name because it was about a half a block long. Benjamin Crowninshield something or other, uh, Bradlee. I mean, it was a very long name and it was very Back Bay Brahmin, Boston Brahmin name. It was easily the classiest name, and he came from the classiest neighborhood and family I ever knew. I don't think he was aware in that sense, and that, I think, had a great deal to do with his charm. I mean, he was a good friend of JFK's and you would never know it unless you happened to be talking about that, and he mentioned that he was sitting over a drink one day and said this, that, or the other thing. Everybody was his pal, his buddy, or someone he didn't know. There was no rank.

### **Ben Bradlee's leadership style**

00:02:58:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Well, I think he was born with a great bullshit meter, and he knew it when it was there or around or—and he sought the opposite constantly, and as an editor... He invited me twice to, I can't remember what they were called, but the mornings they sat around and talked about—or was it the late afternoons? I don't recall. When they talked about what the front page would be, the front-page meeting. And... I don't know, it was kind of a miracle time for me because he didn't—if somebody walked in and didn't know anybody, they might not know who was running the meeting, and yet his firm hand and opinion and so forth was all over it, but that's the way he was able to do it. He was sitting with 20 some people and he was one on one with each of them as though they were alone.

### **First impressions of Ben Bradlee**

00:04:11:00

NORMAN LEAR:

I met Ben because I met Sally. I met Sally first, and she told me, "Oh, you're going to love my husband." And then I learned later that she had told Ben on the phone. I met her in Los Angeles. Actually, in my home. I can't remember who brought her there, it was some event, and she told me I would love her guy, and then I learned later she told him the same, and she was a prophet. We hit it off immediately. It was a couple of years before Quinn, and by the way, he had had Quinn. I met my wife Lyn, not my wife at the time. Told him

we were getting married. So was in... We lived through all of that together, but what I wanted to get to was a special walk on a beach in East Hampton.

00:05:16:00

NORMAN LEAR:

And my bride, 25 years younger than I, [inaudible 00:05:23] child. I at the time had three children. I asked him as we were walking the beach. He was a father for about three or four months, Quinn was a baby, and "What do you think, Ben?" He put his arm on my shoulder and said, "Norman, the best, the best, the best." That encouraged me a great deal. It might have been the reason, but I agreed to become a father again and did that now, you know, once and then twice with twins. And we traveled together, as a result of all of that. There were three kids with the four of us ... Four kids with the four of us on a ... They didn't call it a boat or raft, down a river in France.

### **Ben Bradlee's temperament**

00:06:32:00

NORMAN LEAR:

That's another thing about him, he was always the same. I don't remember him in a mood. I mean, he could be a little angry about something in the headline or have a strong opinion, but to the extent that I knew him, he was not a moody man. He was always in a good mood.

### **Ben Bradlee's battle with polio**

00:06:55:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Polio never stopped Ben for a second. It was, in his life as I saw him live it; it was a five-minute conversation every four years. He told somebody every several years that he had had polio.

### **Ben Bradlee's character**

00:07:18:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Well, I think feeling lucky to be at the right place at the right time was very much a part of his character, but that would be true of anything that happens on any day.

### **World War II**

00:07:36:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Well, for me, I'm sure for him too; it was clearly we were the good guys. We didn't know that there would be several wars where whether we were the good guys was very much in doubt, but it was, you know, it was very clear we were the good guys. In addition to that, I had the question of being Jewish, and when I was nine years old, my dad went to prison for three years, and it was then that I learned that there was a Father Coughlin who hated me and wished other people to dislike if not hate me because I was born to Jewish parents. So I was... I started to say I was a scared kid and then I came off that and met Lee when...because we had in school in those years Civics, Civics classes. We don't have that anymore, unfortunately, and I learned that I had a constitutional Bill of Rights instead of a Declaration that protected me from all of that. Very sustaining in my life, but all of those things played a big role

in my immediate desire to enlist. I didn't do it immediately because my mother begged me not to, but she said she would die, and I guess I thought if you have to die, you have to die. Eight months later or whenever it was that I enlisted. I'm talking about it more now because I've been doing interviews related to my film and book and all that stuff, and a couple of interviews about friends who passed, and especially this friend who also served, but it's as much as I've ever talked about it.

**Ben Bradlee's time in Paris**

00:09:39:00

NORMAN LEAR:

You wouldn't wish me to remember the details, but I do remember, with Art Buchwald—and there are a couple of other names I recognize too, but Art I knew very well. Art and Ben, and I spent a good deal of time together, but there were a couple of other names I know well and can't recall who were in France at that—Paris at that time. Yeah, and that was a good time for Ben. I remember it just as a period in his life when all of that was going on. Now, actually, you know, I don't know if he had a friend with whom he discussed the fun and intimacy, but he did not with me. Just understand what the period was like, but no details.

**Ben Bradlee's friendship with JFK**

00:10:35:00

NORMAN LEAR:

I wished to talk about that more than he did. He backed away from ... Now, maybe there were intimacies between those friends that he didn't wish to

report, and I mean political intimacies, I don't mean ... Maybe he felt that it was John Kennedy's story to tell, but I do recall wishing to know more and not getting it. But my memory is he didn't remember that in intimate conversations with me in a way that allowed me to understand it took place. But no—he wouldn't talk about it.

### **The aftermath of JFK's assassination**

00:11:35:00

NORMAN LEAR:

That expression, the loss of innocence, has come up so many times and— and I'm not so sure I understand that there was a time just before, like ours before, we were at a much more innocent society. Then this happened and we became far less innocent. This was the first assassination. No, it wasn't the first; it was the first in our lifetimes. Innocence is a big word to cast on an entire culture, and I've never been certain we were innocent and suddenly this happened, and we weren't. We have a long way to grow up, even at this moment, but a long way.

### **The Vietnam War**

00:12:42:00

NORMAN LEAR:

It became— We became aware, reasonably early on, that something was wrong. We were not—I talked about good guys in World War II. We were clearly not the good guys here. Even those who believed in the war or believed America can't be wrong, probably believed that more than the war itself. "Wait a minute, we're America, we can't be wrong." If feeling that is a

loss of innocence, then I'm learning something myself this minute. I think part of what made Ben, Ben was that he could be objective about it, and he was above it in a sense that he could see the whole picture, 360 degrees. So you have to be sufficiently above or to the side or—and at the same time, this was a man of great feeling. That was the interesting thing about Ben, too, is he didn't seek to share those feelings, but they existed and... I think that he could be subjective, and 360 degrees is what made him the editor and observer that he was.

**Television reflecting life**

00:14:20:00

NORMAN LEAR:

It was important to me because that's what was going on. We were delivering a family that was living a life in this moment, and I'm doing a show now unlike that show then. We dropped a new one every week, and since we were only a few weeks ahead, we were pretty current. Today you do 13 shows and they're all on, and it's very hard to stay and be current because people binge. We didn't know the word then. It wasn't pushing the envelope as I saw it and as I think about it now. It was reporting. Everybody that worked on these shows read two or three newspapers a day because that's what we all talked about. Got their ideas for the shows from what was happening in the world around them.

00:15:22:00

NORMAN LEAR:

They were paying close attention to their kids and their mates, and they came in with stories that were taking place and problems their kids and wives or



mates were having, and those were the things we talked about. Somebody comes in one day and says, "Hey, you know, there's increased hypertension in Black males." This was a specific thing that happened. "Well, we're doing "Good Times," so let's try to work out a story." We worked out a story. When the show went on the air, let's say October, nobody, the audience didn't know what was coming. And when the show ended, there were, I don't know, thousands of phone calls to the network from Black families seeking more information on hypertension in Black males.

00:16:18:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Now the network knew for the first time, we knew for the first time, or perhaps the first time, that this could happen. So when we were working on something that felt like—we paid more attention to it, told the network up ahead, and sometimes they would put an advisory on to help people in advance. It was what was happening up the street, down the street, and across the street from all of us, if not in our own homes.

### **The Watergate episode of *All in the Family***

00:16:58:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Didn't that end up with Archie brushing him away and saying, "Stand up for the land I love, stand beside her and guide her," and then he goes fully into the song? That came up in rehearsal, it wasn't in the script, his singing that song full out. So he winds up through the land from above, and he winds up. "God bless America, land that I love." Finishes the song, and it was hilarious because the others were fighting trying to get his ear. He just bellowed the

song. When we did it in a dress rehearsal, the network said, "Can't do it." We didn't have the right to do it; we didn't have the license to do it. It was so great.

00:17:51:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Carroll O'Connor was so great. I wound up saying if there's any problem with this, because I knew if we sought a license to do it, we would make the call and be refused because Irving Berlin didn't allow that. And somebody would refuse it, miles or blocks or many stories below Mr. Berlin, and he wouldn't even know about it. I said, "I'll take the brunt of any problem, and sign some paper or whatever." The show went on the air and it was great, and maybe six weeks later there was a phone call. Irving Berlin wanted to talk to me. A day and a half later after I recovered—no, I took the call and he wanted to thank me because he had just seen it and loved it. And – that's my God Bless America story.

### **Appearing on Nixon's Enemies List**

00:18:59:00

NORMAN LEAR:

No I didn't know about that until, I don't know, 20 years ago. Or many years after the fact. Nobody learned about it until the White House tapes came out. By then I knew I was on Nixon's enemies list, and I was proud of my company, the company I was in.

### **Nixon's resignation**

00:19:30:00

NORMAN LEAR:

He resigns every four weeks for me because I constantly am seeing the footage. Somebody's running it some place. So he just resigned the day before yesterday again. I remember it as I've seen it portrayed to me constantly.

**Jason Robards and *All the President's Men***

00:19:54:00

NORMAN LEAR:

I remember that very well. Alan Pakula directed it and I loved Jason Robards. I had worked with him on *Divorce American Style* (1967) and now I'm not remembering as I repeated, which came first? *All the President's Men* or *Divorce American Style*? But I think the Robards character came as close as anybody was going to get it on film. I remember thinking about it, too, I never thought of another actor that, "Oh, if they had used so and so." Jason was as good as it could get.

**The free press**

00:20:39:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Attacks on freedom of the press wherever they have taken place have great similarities. People are in charge who don't want to be pestered by having the citizenry or the people who know him the best. They don't want them to know a lot of what they're doing, and so the press is pesky for them. The more they want to control, the less they want everybody to know that's what's happening, and so the problem grows deeper and thicker between the officeholder and the reporter.

**The Trump administration**

00:21:48:00

NORMAN LEAR:

What's going on today? You know, as I sit here, it's only 10, 12, 14 days, whatever it is, into this administration and I'm not sure we know how or understand how serious all of it is yet, but I'm thinking this is a man who has to have his way, but I get stuck on the word man. Not because I think he's not a man, but because I think he could be a boy, and this is a child running the nation. I see similarities in a general way in history, which would include Nixon, but this individual is totally unique in my 94-year experience.

00:22:55:00

NORMAN LEAR:

I think Ben would be deeply concerned and licking his chops would express how he felt as I felt as we all felt at the beginning, because there was a time we were all kind of amazed and wondering, and even it could be said enjoying, because we didn't accept the threat that it could happen, or we hadn't accepted it at that point. I don't think he'd be salivating now. I think he'd be deep into wishing the public – I think if Ben were here, there'd be a much bigger fuss about the president's taxes. Yeah, and the press has somehow accepted that. They're not continuing to fight.

**Living in the moment**

00:23:55:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Oh, I love that we're going to conclude with this. Yes, yes, and because it happens to be the way that I feel, too. There are two little words in the English language we don't pay enough attention to. We accept their worth, their importance. "Over," and "next." Something's over, it's over. We're onto next. If there was a hammock in the middle of over and next, that's the best way to express living in the moment, and Ben lived in the moment. I mean, look at it. It took me 94 years, some months, some weeks, some days, to get to this moment where I'm looking at that little red dot in the mirror. A guys, seen the guy's script, can't see his face, he's looking into—It took all that time to get here, and it took every split second of his life to hear me say this, and everybody who is listening, wherever they see this, today and in the future. It will have taken every split second of your life, all of you, to join me in love of Ben Bradlee.

**Adjectives to describe Ben Bradlee**

00:25:22:00

NORMAN LEAR:

Strong male, gentle, giant, sweet, good with seven O's, and great.

**Ben Bradlee's quest for the truth**

00:25:49:00

NORMAN LEAR:

People live their lives not wanting to hear the truth much of the time, and not knowing it, not understanding that they don't want to be dealt the truth much of the time. Ben was after the truth, which if Ben were here today and

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he, I mean, *The Washington Post*, which I consider in Remnick's terms,  
“dangerous” at this moment, would be far more dangerous.

**END TC: 00:26:30:00**