TOM BROKAW INTERVIEW
THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

TOM BROKAW
Anchor, NBC Nightly News (1982-2004)
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Interviewed by: John Maggio
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ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

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Tom Brokaw

Anchor, NBC Nightly News (1982-2004)

Getting into journalism

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, I grew up in a very remote part of America where there was not a lot going on around me—except I took everything that was going on around me—and told everyone else about what was happening. When I was—old enough to walk and talk, they all remembered that. And my mother was the postmistress and she was, like, the managing editor of the town. She heard everything that was happening. So we had a discussion every night. And then

I didn't have television. We didn't even have a daily newspaper. I carried the Minneapolis paper on Sundays. But I was always interested in current events that came to me through radio first. And then we moved to a town large enough to have television. And it was a magical window for our family on the world. I was 15 at the time. We could go home at night, have supper, as we called it, and tune in to AM Brinkley. And see things I never thought I would see in this small town. At the same time, I got a job after basketball practice working at a radio station. They needed a little interim help at night. So I read the news and got interested in broadcasting. And I had a certain I suppose inordinate skill at it for someone as young as I was. And later, I thought, "Maybe I can make a living at this."

The seduction of journalism

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TOM BROKAW:

I think the seduction of journalism was about all that. First of all, I had a front row seat of whatever was going on, which I loved. You didn't have to go to an office and sit at a desk, you know, all day long. You got to go out and find out what was happening, turn over rocks, see what was beneath them. And I also liked the camaraderie of journalism very quickly. I liked hanging out with other journalists—at an early part of my career. And if there was something going on, you had an—excuse to go see it. So what could beat that? I was never a 9:00 to 5:00 guy. I was always someone who got up early and worked late and-- loved to talk about what I was seeing. Sometimes, I suspect, to the boredom of some of my friends because I would come home or we'd be at a

party and I would kind of have been in the middle of something that day that was very engaging, and they'd been selling insurance.

A journalist's lifestyle

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TOM BROKAW:

I don't think we ever had a conversation that was about that. "Well, Ben, let's talk about our careers." It just didn't happen. But at dinner parties and in times when we were in the car together, we would talk about the life. And—we—you know, no one lived that life more completely than Ben did. And so, I loved hearing his stories about his early days in Paris, and then how he started *Newsweek*, and what it was like when he was in Washington when they were really—beginning to upset the old practices. And at the same time, he was very interested in what I was doing at the White House or other things that were going on. It was just part of who we were. So– and out of that conversation came observations about journalism, how it was changing, who was doing it well, who wasn't doing it so hot—what we learned along the way.

Ben Bradlee's persona

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, even from a distance, Ben was already a legend. I mean-- we all knew about him. We knew about his friendship with John Kennedy, first of all. That—that came out fairly quickly when I was coming of age as a journalist. And—the other part of Ben was that he always looked the part. I always said

that if Ben hadn't been born, Benjamin Crowninshield Bradlee, we would've had to invent him because he—he fit a piece. You know, he had the lead in our play. And when I met him, I remember in Washington I had arrived—in the summer of '73, so Watergate was under way. And—Carl and Bob were out there doing the great work. We knew what Ben's role in all of that was. And there was a newspaper editor's conference. And Ben came down the hall. And he had a kind of built in swagger about him. And he looked the part. He also in those days, before Sally got a hold of him, he had a terrible wardrobe by my standards. I mean, he was an old money guy, you know? He had kind of a tattered pair of khakis and—an ill-fitting blazer—and an old tie. Those of us who were working class and had aspirations, we'd go out and buy a new wardrobe every six months 'cause we wanted to look the part. Ben didn't care about that. And I remember seeing him, thinking, "God, simple casting gave us Ben Bradlee."

Ben Bradlee's personality

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TOM BROKAW:

He was magnetic. He walked into a room and the place kinda lit up. And he was—he never played by protocol. You know—the swear words would come flying out, you know, and he had that raspy voice. And you were in the presence of somebody with a magnetic personality. You knew that almost immediately.

Ben Bradlee's time in the navy

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TOM BROKAW:

We talked a lot about his experience in the Navy. I always thought that there was a portrait of Ben that so crystalized America—the America I didn't know very well at that point. He was in Harvard Yard in his Naval whites. He was graduating early and getting married and going off to war. And I thought, "That's what Fitzgerald wrote about, that's what people wrote about in those days, about that class of people." And what—their confidence and their obligations to their country. They came out of Harvard and there they were going to war. And if anyone was cast to look like someone who should be on a ship, it was Ben. And then when we talked about it later, I think it was a transformative experience for him because as so many of the Ivy Leaguers or old money people who came from privileged lives did, he bumped up against ordinary people—working class. He said they had a guy offshore—on shore, actually, that his ship was in touch with and he was a spotter for them. But he was risking his life every day, living in a jungle with Japanese all around him. And finally he said, "I gotta get outta here for a little break," so they pulled him in. Ben said the guy was about 5'6", weighed about 130 pounds, he was a little farm kid.

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TOM BROKAW:

And he said, "My God, he was the most heroic guy." And he said, "We fed him, tucked him in, gave him a little rest and sent him back." And he said, "It made a huge impression on me." And then on the way home, he said, "We would gather on the fantail of the ship and we were beginning a new life. We'd been at war. And—the world would be changing. And so we sat around and talked about what we wanted to do." And he said, "Some wanted to be school

teachers, others wanted to be doctors. And I thought that journalism was for me. I wanted to tell these kinds of stories." But he said, "I learned also from those men who came from different backgrounds than I did about aspirations and about—about ambition and about going home and their homes were gonna be much different than mine. Some were going back to a farm, some were in the Midwest. And it broadened my horizons. I—I learned a lot from them." He didn't go back to a farm in the Midwest, he went to Paris.

Ben Bradlee's time in Paris

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TOM BROKAW:

Ben always had this phrase about his—relationships, "Oh, I got lucky." And I'd say, "Come on, Ben. You know, you didn't get lucky, you were chasing her at that point." He was in Paris. You know, what could be wrong. And he—anyway, he had the language when he came back. Paris in the post-war years was almost as good as I suspected as it was in the early Hemingway eras, you know, when he was there. That was—a wonderful time. A lot of American—servicemen got smart and they took the GI Bill and they went to Paris to study French. You know, and they had a stipend every month—things were good—food was very good and inexpensive. There were a lotta girls who didn't have guys coming home. So it was the city of light—and the city of excitement for young Americans to be there.

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TOM BROKAW:

You know, he did go to Algeria for the uprising that was going on there. I can't think of a better assignment for a young journalist than to be in Paris right

after the war. I just can't imagine it—how—exciting it must've been journalistically and how wonderful it must've been from a personal point of view. And Ben being Ben—had a lotta pals over there. I mean, others had come from—his slice of life, from the Ivy League, from Boston, the Back Bay. And they were hanging out. So it wasn't the guy who arrived in Paris wide eyed and trying to find his way. He was at ease with them.

Ben Bradlee's personality

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TOM BROKAW:

Well—what I always liked about Ben was that he—you could not, in effect, pigeon hole him. He looked the part, he had the background. But—you know, the profanity and the kind of guy to guy stuff was so great. And I always used to say that—he'd walk in a room and make men envy him and women go weak at the knees. You know—he was just that kind of a presence.

And—look, he was my pal. So—but I don't think I'm overstating this. I think I can—and a lotta people felt the same way about him. And he was—easy to be with. I was a newcomer in Washington. And what I learned later, there were some in the Washington Press Corps who looked down their nose at me because I'd come from California. And I had been there about a month and I was doing my job at the White House and—on a couple of occasions—you know, I nailed a couple of big stories. And Ben came to me—one day and put his arm around me and said, "You know what you're doing, kid," and that's all I asked. You know, and I had—I didn't know him that well at that—he didn't need to do that. But he did. So—he had that ability as well, to be not above the working class. He kind of identified with him. I've talked to others who've

worked for him over the years and they all have those kinds of stories. He would dismiss them with a profanity of some kind. "Oh, don't worry about it, god dammit, just go do your job," you know? And they loved that.

A lifelong interest in politics

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TOM BROKAW:

One of my very first memories of life—again, my mother was a huge influence-- was she woke me up—in 1948—when Truman had defeated Dewey. And we were a working class family. My parents were what I call dirt road Democrats. They idolized FDR. And Harry Truman was a demi-God in our—not demagogue, demi-God in our family because he was from the Midwest and he looked like everybody's grandfather out there. And they were very worried that Thomas Dewey would be the new president. The little man on the wedding cake. And they didn't have any identifish—identification with him at all. My mother woke me up about 6:00 in the morning and yelled, "We won." And that—I remember that moment vividly. And I think that was the beginning for me of being interested in politics and paying attention to what was going on.

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TOM BROKAW:

I remember that, before that, you know—General MacArthur had this larger than life reputation. Truman fired him because he was taking control without checking with the civilian bosses. And my mother said that was the right thing to do. MacArthur doesn't work for himself, he works for the president. And the president has fired him and he should've. That made a big

impression on me so I began to pay attention, you know, to all kinds of political things that were going on. We lived in a state that was a mix of Republicans and Democrats. George McGovern was a young congressman. He'd had a big war. Joe Foss was a big Republican. He had a very big war, Medal of Honor recipient. And—they were good friends, but at the same time, they were trying to do the best for the state, and I was paying attention to all of that. And then I was kind of a student politician. I—you know, I was a jock—but I also won a lot of offices and that kind of thing. So it all came quite natural to me.

Changing how the White House was covered

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, I wasn't there for Vietnam. I was there for Watergate. And Watergate was the biggest single political story of not just my lifetime, but one of the biggest stories of—this country's history. And the White House Press Corps was a small unit of all males with one or two exceptions. Helen Thomas among them. And it was kind of a traveling circus—keeping track of what was going on. I didn't know all the rituals, so I kind of played by my own rules and I—I went to the Hill—sneaked outta the White House to hear what they were saying up there. And I had two or three senators and congressmen who would kind of give me a brief on how they were seeing it. That was helping me there. I found somebody in the – deep in the White House—Bowels who was—a member of the congressional relations staff. He knew everything that was going on. And so, he was telling me a lot that you wouldn't get from briefing or from people who were on the first floor. So I was doing all right on

my own. But what I also remember is that the White House had way too much control over the press and how it behaved.

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TOM BROKAW:

I don't remember—exactly the incident. We could not tape the briefing. They would not allow us to film it. And I thought, "This has gotta come to an end. These are our primary tools in television and one day," oh, I know. It was the—it was the Monday after the Saturday night massacre. And Hague was gonna brief us. And Ziegler looked up and I was standing next to my camera and I got Dan to stand up there as well. And I said, "We're gonna roll the camera." And Ziegler saw what was going on, went back and got Hague. Hague came out and we rolled the cameras and from then on, we could do it. We didn't ask for permission. You know, that was a small victory, but it was an important one.

Watergate and *The Washington Post*

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TOM BROKAW:

It was the bible. You know, you got up in the morning—got *The Post* and read it. You didn't have it online in those days 'cause you had to figure out what was going on. I pretty quickly developed a relationship with Bob more than with Carl. I'd—really didn't know him. We ran into each other a couple of times socially. So I would pick up the phone and call him. I think I might've been the only member of the White House Press Corps besides *The Washington Post* representative who would call. And I'd say, "You know, this doesn't make any sense. Let me – how does this match up with what you're

hearing?" And he's talked to me about that since then. He said, "I—was a little surprised. There you were, one reporter calling another one—kind of running down the questions that you have, or running—the traps." And I said, "Well, no one knew more than you did and I wanted to make sure that I was on the right track here." I remember one time getting a call from one of the—president's principal advisors, who was some distance from—from what had happened with Watergate, but he'd been brought in. And he called me with obviously the brief for the day. And it made no sense. And I called him back and I said, "Are you sure this is what you were told to tell me?" And he said, "I'm only instructed to tell you what I told you." So I remember calling Bob and I said, "This is the la," I don't remember what the incident, "If this is the latest, this," I mean, he says, "Oh my God." And we talked about the direction that they were going off on. So there was a lot of collaboration that went on at that time.

Ben Bradlee's outlook

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TOM BROKAW:

I know they were very tough times for him. And he had Kay standing behind him as well, which was important. I've talked to Bob about that. And—Bob I think gave me a real insight into Ben. He said, "He never looked back. He never had any regrets. If we made a little mistake or if he made a mistake, move on. You know, you just don't agonize over that." And I think that that came out of a self-confidence about how he'd been raised and where he came from and who he was. And you had to have big cojones to do that story the way that he did. And Benjamin Crowninshield had big cojones.

Ben Bradlee's friendship with JFK

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, I—you know, it was part of who Ben is and it was fascinating and it was probably utterly inappropriate, given his job. He was running *Newsweek* and he was driving the *Time* competitors crazy when he'd get off the plane—and there he would be, side by side with the president. He has always said to me, insisted, he didn't know about Ben—about the president's extracurricular activities with women. Okay, Ben. I don't know. But—he, you know, went to his grave saying, "I didn't know that there was that much going on. You know, he'd make a comment about a woman from time to time, but I didn't know about how active he actually was." Some others have said the same thing, but God, there was so much of it, it would be hard for him not to know. Others have said the relationship was much more-- not so Ben to the president, but to the—to the two wives at that time. They were the—that's how the relationship began. They were comfortable with each other. I—I can see where the president would be very comfortable around Ben. They come from the same gene pool, in a way. They have common life experiences, a kind of raucous sense of humor. So—I could see how that—that would've happened. Now—it wouldn't happen. And there were *Washington Post* reporters who were not happy about it at all later on, would say, "Look, he got too close to the Democrats. You know, he was playing on that side of the—of the ledger more than he was on the Republican side."

Ben Bradlee's politics

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, Ben—you know, Ben was emblematic of-- of Georgetown. He lived there and his pals came from there, and he was connected to all the parts of Georgetown. And—you could see where a Republican administration would be saying, "That's the other government and they're against us. And—and Bradlee is a part of that. He runs *The Post*." So—you know, I can step back and, from a clinical point of view, say, "You know, look, they had a right to be concerned about what was going on—on that side of things." And if you read the history now, when people were talking about it a lot more, there was—a disdainfulness on the part of the Georgetown social set about—not just Richard Nixon, but the people that he brought to Washington, they never felt connected there.

Reporting on the president and other public officials

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, I don't—I really don't know enough about that. I was not in Washington at the time. I think there was a lot of protection, not just for JFK, but for Lyndon as well and other politicians by the mostly male establishment—Washington Press Corps at the time. You know, people knew who was sleeping with which secretary and—that was on the Republican side as well as on the Democratic side. The Bobby Baker connection to LBJ, John F. Kennedy not just in women, but—the – discussion between Bobby Kennedy and John Kennedy about Castro and what they ought to be doing about him. That stuff was out there—if you will, in the fabric of how

Washington worked. How much of it then got into the print—or got on the air. There were others who were—like Jack Anderson, who was called a muckraker, but he was really breaking down a lot of those barriers, quite honestly. And—and getting the story. Drew Pearson was another one who was doing that kind of work. But they were thought off to the side. They were not part of the gentleman establishment of the Press Corps.

Ben Bradlee's relationship with Kay Graham

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TOM BROKAW:

When I saw them together, it was plain how much they cared about each other, that they—she trusted Ben to run her paper. He was—indefatigably charming and a little seductive—from a personal point of view about personality. He knew how to talk to her. And—he wasn't cowered by her. I think that that was important. I think it was important to her. And he gave her confidence that she could stand her place as the publisher of *The Washington Post*. I remember walking out of a party one night and—I was leaving just behind Ben and Kay. And Ben, in a kind of mischievous way, opened the door and said, "For the most important woman in the world." And she turned around and said, "Oh, Bradlee, knock that off." And I said, "Yeah, for God sakes, knock that off." And he kinda laughed, went out the door. But that was the kind of relationship that they had. He wasn't, you know—in any way fawning over or trying to build her up. It was a little running joke between them, "I'm gonna open the door for the most powerful woman in the world."

Ben Bradlee's character

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TOM BROKAW:

He was fearless—in what he did. And, as I said, he had an enormous amount of self-confidence. He took—made some big plays and they paid off. Some of 'em didn't, you know? The Janet Cooke story was a disaster, the woman who invented a heroin addict as a youngster. And—*The Post* survived that, but it was not easy. But he moved on. As Bob said to me later, you know, "Ben didn't look back. Gotta move on. Gotta—you know, don't dwell on your mistakes. Move on and don't make 'em again." So I think that was always a key to who he was as a person and as an editor. And it made him kind of fun to be around, frankly. I don't remember ever seeing Ben—with deep, personal grudges about people. Some people he didn't like and he kinda let you know that. But he didn't dwell on it. You know, he was always there to have a good time.

First impressions of Ben Bradlee

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TOM BROKAW:

He didn't know me. And I knew who he was, but I—I don't even think we had friends in common. But very quickly, we were at a couple dinner parties together and-- and there was so much going on at the White House. I was on the air a lot. So—he could see—you know, whether I knew what I was doing or not I guess because he—he was very generous.

The merging of print and broadcast journalism

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, print in that story—could not have been more important. I mean, you need the detail that print can provide. And the w-- what I call the forensic work that—that print can do. We were handicapped in a lot of areas. I went—when I first met Bob Woodward, I said—he said, "How come you guys have a hard time with a story?" And I said, "Because so much of it is abstract. It's not—it's not a picture that we can put on the air. I think we need to do better with graphics and animation." He said, "Well, you can't make cartoons," I said, "No, I'm not talking about cartoons, Bob, I'm talking about techniques in which we can follow the money on the screen, in which people can understand it. You can't just talk about it verbally. You've got to show it." "Oh," he said, "Well, that makes sense." And he—later raised that with me. He said, "I didn't know what you were talking about at that time but now, of course, our techniques are a lot better." The other thing about television is—it arrives and goes in an instant. And there's very little—opportunity to turn back.

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TOM BROKAW:

So I gotta read that again. I've gotta go over that again. So it's impressionistic—on television. And then the words are competing with the images. So there—all of that was in play at that time. Print was still, you know—print was still the big weapon in journalism in those days, I mean, and with good reason. *The Times*, a great story—a great newspaper, *The Post* was a great newspaper. Magazine journalism was very important then. What turned out to be my closest friend at the White House was with *The Wall*

Street Journal and—they were doing great work as well. Those of us in television were using newspapers as a foundation. But also television was providing print with stories as well about reaction and the look on—people and what was going on at the White House so you could see it. And it was a merger. I'm—I do think that when I arrived in '73 the old print guys were still down the nose about television.

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TOM BROKAW:

"Who are these -- ? You know, they--" at the—at the Defense Department, you couldn't roll a camera, for example, without the permission of print guys. That changed. And—we had a new generation of—of television journalists coming through the gate who were serious about what they were doing. And that made an impression on the new generation of print people, who were coming through the gate.

Ben Bradlee turned a good newspaper into a great newspaper

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TOM BROKAW:

You know, I was aware that *The Post* was constantly rising and that *The Times* was still the great, gray, mother newspaper of America, the go to institution. And Ben was making *The Post* a livelier paper. I would go in and out of Washington. I always made a point of reading it when I got there. They had terrific political reporters that he pulled in. And—and the best reporters, to this day, talk about what it was like to work for Ben. Those who've gone on to other jobs, David Remnick, great editor of *The New Yorker*, loved working for Ben and learned a lot from him. Mark Leibovich, who is with *The New York*

Times, talks about the hardest lunch he ever had was when Bradlee told him, "What the hell are you doing, leaving *The Post*? You can't do that." So—he had a cadre of followers, a long one.

Ben Bradlee's persona at the office

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TOM BROKAW:

I was actually invited by Woodward to come sit in on an editorial planning meeting one day. Ben was a little surprised to see me sitting at the end of the table, but we got along well. And I'm—I was so struck by Ben's casual air. He sat at the head of the table. Each section made their pitch and Bob was doing—in those days metro, and it—it was hard to get that one on the front page. And he had this big windup and Bradlee looked at him and go, "Come on, move on." And then everybody talked about him going to the office, propping up his feet and doing a crossword puzzle, and occasionally summon somebody in and his feet would not come off the desk. And he would say to them—you know, "Are we right on this one? I've gotten a couple of calls. And we--" and—Remnick said to me one day that he said, "I promise you—I'm not gonna get the paper in trouble. I—I think I've got this right." And—and Ben's feet, he said, came apart and said, "I don't care about that, god dammit, just go do the story." And—that was the relationship. He wasn't barreling around the newsroom, I gather. You have to ask others who were there, you know, and thumping on the desk. He was self-confident about what he was doing. And—and in this business, that's very important.

Moving on after Janet Cooke

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TOM BROKAW:

I don't know all the details of this. I do know, based on my own life, that if you have one big success after another, intuitively, you kind of feel like you're bulletproof, you know? "I can't get this wrong. Look how much I've done right." And it's always gotta go back, you gotta go through the steps. And however grand or how many prizes you have, you gotta play by the fundamentals. Well, you know, I've overreached, I think, from time to time. Nothing quite like that. But I made assumptions that turned out to be wrong, based on past experience. You know, I'm—this is my intuition. Well, my intuition was dead wrong. I think the first test of journalism is still the fundamentals of "get it right." Your sister's name, check it out. Whatever you wanna do. You have to play by those rules. And that's the bond between those people who read or watch what we do, and what we do. And it's not just for the audience, it's for everyone in the building and everyone—working on a story.

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TOM BROKAW:

These are the standards and we're gonna stay with 'em. That one was a colossal miss. He didn't confide in me. And—again, that was—he was never on the couch, you know, physically or otherwise. So—you know—we just didn't talk about it very much. And he didn't raise it very much. He just kept moving on. Acknowledged they were wrong and—and kept moving on. So—you know, I've often thought I wish I could do that. You know, I—I tend

to carry around my mistakes. You know, wake up in the middle of the night, "Why'd I do that?" I don't—I think Ben probably slept through the night.

All the President's Men

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TOM BROKAW:

It was a great movie. And I-- the thing is, it holds up. It's a great piece about journalism. I was really at—I was recently-- at a New York Film Critics event. And they invited Bob because it was the-- it was the story of *The Boston Globe*—that was getting all the prizes. And Michael Keaton got up and looked at Bob and said, "You set the pace." And I thought that was dead right. You know, that was a great piece about journalism. There have been some very good journalism pieces, but they were kind of outrageous. You know, Roz Russell and Cary Grant and—you know—in the halcyon days of Ben Hecht. But this was serious, tough stuff. And it's—I've always been kind of surprised there's not more of that kind of thing. And I think the success of these recent efforts will probably move that along some.

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TOM BROKAW:

I've heard too many stories 'cause Redford is a friend of mine. And—he came up with the idea. And he pulled it off. That, I thought, was a tricky piece to do. So I would hear these stories about everybody would—in *The Post* newsroom would not want to be caught up in Hollywood. So they would be, as Bob said—they would be more casual than usual. But he said they all had new haircuts and—and great looking sweaters on. And—and then some of the senior editors would call 'em in—you know, and say, "Yeah, I just don't want

this to get in the way of what we're doing here. But by the way, are you gonna get this part of the story?" So, look, it's bound to affect any newsroom. I mean, we're in television; we're in the showbiz part of journalism as well. But I once had a writer who I liked a lot, she'd grown up in the Bronx, she was tough, she was a New Yorker. She wasn't impressed with anything until Bob DeNiro came to visit me one day. Then she was impressed. So it's the American way.

Watergate and Nixon's downfall

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, he had a big following—even without Twitter. He had a whole conservative Press Corps—on radio primarily. Very late in Watergate, we went to Phoenix where Barry Goldwater was doing a big rally for him. And they put the White House Press Corps in a little cage off to the side. And-- and then they turned the lions in the room loose on us—all the followers of Richard Nixon. And it was very uncomfortable at that point. And there were some exchanges. And then you would hear from people when you'd go out. You know, "Leave the president alone, dammit. We've had enough of Watergate."

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TOM BROKAW:

But the evidence just kept—piling up. It just kept moving—against him. And pretty soon, the country began to get it. And then what I remember vividly, I was in San Clemente covering him when we got word the Supreme Court had ruled that he had to turn over the tapes. And—overnight—the country, when they heard the tapes and heard what they were about, his friends on the Hill,

one of them who I'd been courting—talking to a lot, called me late that afternoon and said, "Mr. Brokaw, you've been—generous with your time. I'm—I'm here to tell you that we're gonna tell the president he has to resign as a Republican." So there was that going on as well.

Building the case against Nixon

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TOM BROKAW:

Every time they advanced the story—the evidence was—indisputable. You know, what they were seeing—made sense in terms of advancing the story. There wasn't anything ethereal about it. It didn't end up in the paper of—we're a little fuzzy around the edges. They would nail it day, after day, after day. And, you know, and any criminal investigation, any cop will tell you that's how you build a case. You build it point by point and—and fact by fact. And Bob and—Carl were doing that indefatigably. Made a couple of mistakes along the way, but they kept on moving on. And then there was the history of Richard Nixon that—a lot of people were aware of. That—this was not unlike him to do something like that. And then he had that crowd of—young, eager beavers around him—who were going off to jail for—perjury. And—should not have been in the jobs that they had in the first place. And that's not talking about Haldeman and—and Ehrlichman. They were grownups. And Ehrlichman was a lawyer. He should've known better, but he didn't. So if you take that as a foundation, how does it square with Nixon saying, "I wasn't involved"?

The dangers of social media

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TOM BROKAW:

I think you have to take risks and you have to stand up—and keep moving forward. And it's tough when you have an environment like we have now, where the country is so deeply divided and social media has changed everything so much. I can make the most benign statement on social media that has nothing to do with politics. And there will be a response to it that will go on for pages, from people—who are inclined not to like me, for whatever reason. "Brokaw, crawl back under a rock. You're an old guy. Just give it up. I don't wanna hear from you anymore." And then I find out when I read it a little carefully and try to do some forensic work, there are kinda these gangs. They all know each other. So, "Well, you got that right, Doug. And by the way, should he—why should he be—claiming the greatest generation? He has nothing to do with the military. He hates the military, based on his reporting." And that's there permanently. So that—that's a lotta pressure.

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TOM BROKAW:

Now I'm at an age and a stage where I, "Gimme a break and—go on." But for other young reporters and producers—this is a tough environment. In part because of the access that everyone has. You know, we always had our critics. I mean, Russia's been around a long time on radio. There were people writing about us before. But—they didn't have the reach—they were not as clever as they are now. And it's not to say there's not a lot of great stuff on social media. There's some fascinating analytical stuff in a variety of areas. Not just political, but economic and medical and-- and cultural. But there are people

out there, I say, who are sitting in their underwear, who couldn't get a date for the prom, and they're gonna get even. And so, this is their full time occupation.

The new world of digital journalism

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TOM BROKAW:

I judged this past year—a competition for political coverage for the Robin Toner Award. She was a great reporter from *The New York Times*, graduate of Syracuse and they got the Robin Toner Award up there. We saw such brilliant reporting on the part of online reporters. One—the winner had been at *The Post* but he wanted more freedom. So he's gone to an online site. He did the best job I have ever seen on tracking down where the money comes from and who controls it. People we'd not heard of before. Money has always been a fascination in my political reporting. It's more than the mother's milk. It is—it's a lethal instrument, in many ways. And this guy went out there and he had no deadline pressures. He just worked the trail and found a minister in Ohio in a small town who controlled, like, $100 million in campaign contributions. That's very important work. And I would hope that the online entities will rise, if you will, and become more prominent in where and how we get our news.

The mighty Sally Quinn

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, I met her in 1972. She came to California and I immodestly did have a kind of a pretty good reputation as knowing what was going on in California politics. So I was included when the—when the print press would come out. *The Post* people were Johnny Apple from *The Times* or—Bob Novak and they would call me. And then I had a friend by the name of Roy Arenz who was running *The Post* bureau in those days. And he invited me over to—a kind of gathering—at his house with *The Post* reporters who were covering the big '72 campaign, which was Bobby and Gene McCarthy and all hell was breaking loose. And—Sally came up to me and said, "I'm told that you were offered a role in *The Candidate* and you turned it down." And I said, "Yeah, I did." "Well, why would you do that? What—don't you wanna be in movies?" And I said, "No, Sally, I don't want people to confuse what it is that I do. I have a hard enough time, you know, persuading people when I'm on television I'm serious about this. This is a journalistic profession. So if I show up on movies, they'll think, 'Well, he's an actor.'

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TOM BROKAW:

So I—I turned 'em down." "God, I wouldn't have done that. I've always wanted to be in movies," she said. Time goes on. We're in Washington. And—Ben and Sally are married at that point. And some friends of ours had a very small dinner for Elizabeth Taylor who was coming through town. And I was sitting—seated on one side of Elizabeth Taylor and our host was on the other side. Sally was on my right and she was leaning across me—you know—practically with her head on my shoulder, trying to get in on the conversation. And I finally—turned to Liz and—Taylor—I can call her Liz 'cause I had dinner with her one night. Said, "Miss Taylor, Sally Quinn, who

always wanted to be a movie star." And Liz Taylor looked at her and said, "Oh, is that so?" Sally leaned back… pretty funny moment. I'm extremely fond of her. I'm extremely fond of her. It goes without saying. And I could've done that and still been her friend.

Ben Bradlee and Sally Quinn

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TOM BROKAW:

Yeah—well, then after that, it was not just Ben, it was Ben and Sally. I mean, that's how you referred to them. You know, they—they—set up shop in Georgetown and they were—part of the—center of gravity if you will—for—the press and for social circles. And they had friends way outside—the normal—I suppose boundaries of—of press. Norman Lear was a pal of theirs who would come back and be their parties, Tom Hanks would be there. They had a wide range. And they liked to be around interesting, lively people. So it—it was fun to be in their company.

Ben Bradlee chose his words carefully

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, there was such a long string of profanities; it would be hard just to pick one out. I came from a pretty profane family. My father was—a hardhat construction worker. And—he was a really—great man. But it was just the pitfall of his life. We used to say that he could hyper—that he could hyphenate—something between bull and the other expression—in a way that no one else could. It was just part of his language. So I grew up that way and I

grew up in locker rooms. So I thought I have to be careful sometimes about how I use—Ben, it was just par—it just rolled out of him and it always seemed appropriate. When we were at the National Cathedral—doing—his service, I was one of the eulogists. And I was struggling with how I was gonna deal with this essential part of his character. And it included not just verbal things, but physical acts as well.

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TOM BROKAW:

And I almost said, when I was up there, that I was tempted to engage in a little bit of—Ben language and Ben response, 'cause I could almost see him at the back of the room. But I'm an Episcopalian, I've got cancer and I can't take those chances at this point in my life in this room, so I decided not to do that. That was my—was my judgment. It didn't make any difference where he was; it just came out of him. It was, you know, part of his charm. One of the things I teased him about when the book came out was he had that expression, "And I got lucky." You know, whether it was some girl that he'd met or some affair that he was having. And it was not quite his fault, he just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Ben Bradlee's family dynamic

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TOM BROKAW:

It was—clear—at the service for him. But everybody seemed to come together. I made—a determined point to acknowledge all the members of all the families. And I knew how much he cared about them. And—I think under any circumstances, it would've been tough to be a child of Ben Bradlee. You're

competing, in a way, with this larger than life, legendary figure, who has a big appetite for life in a lot of ways. But—he managed to do it. And—and when I looked down that pew that day and saw all those attractive people and knew all the different parts to it. I thought, only Ben could've pulled everybody in here without a lot of hostility playing out. I've been in—spoken at other funerals where the families were sitting on opposite sides of the church and they were ready to kill at the end of the day. So—Ben managed to do that as well. And he did it in his own, inimitable fashion.

Ben Bradlee's upbringing

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TOM BROKAW:

Well, I think it's part of Ben's birthright. I—he grew up in a privileged family. And—without knowing exactly how he was raised, except that he had—mentors who would come over and teach him how to play football and other things in the summertime. And he obviously went to very good schools. His family was not wildly wealthy. They went through difficult times in the '30s. But they also had—an assumption about their place. I remember that he told me that when he was in the war, his father would have lunch at the Harvard Club with Samuel Eliot Morison, the greatest Naval historian of our time, who would know where Ben's ship was and share with him what they'd been involved in. I mean, how great—how essential that is in terms of describing where Ben came from. So I think he just emerged with a lot of self-confidence-- about how he would go through life.

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TOM BROKAW:

And—that was conveyed when he walked in a room. He—he was who he was. And the way he treated people, he was very engaging. I watched him a lot of times, kind of fascinated by his curiosity about folks. He came out to Montana one time—which is not Ben Bradlee country. And he knew the fishing guys and the ranch managers by the end of the day and had a lot of questions for them about what was going on. He was-- he was—a kind of natural person. You know, I came from a different set of circumstances. But at an early age, I was known on television in the small towns in which I worked, in Sioux City, Iowa and Omaha, Nebraska. And that prepared me, I suppose, for being recognized. Because I wasn't making any money in those days and the fact that people would get kind of excited if I walked in a room, I thought, "What's the value of that? You know, I'm gonna have a hard time making the rent next month." So that had a big impact on me.

Ben Bradlee loved good reporting

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TOM BROKAW:

He was not a deeply philosophical man. He was not someone who was going off at the end of the day in a—Benedictine, monk kind of fashion and thinking about what it is that we need to do. He loved a great story. And he knew that was a great story. And he knew that there was enormous opportunity in any administration, from malfeasance, for hiding from the country what they deserved to know. He knew that if he got that story that everyone would be talking about it and they would be better off for knowing about it. But it was, "Go get the story." It was—old fashioned, front-page journalism that drove him and made it a great, sophisticated newspaper because he didn't blink

when it came to a big, complicated story. *The Post* was not filled just with what was going on in crime in Washington DC.

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TOM BROKAW:

They were taking on the tough stories. And then he invented the style section. And the Style section gave you the other piece of Ben. He liked the social part of it and he liked not just the artificial part of the social part. But he kinda liked who was linking with whom, who was up and who was down. Who was the newcomer in town tryin' to make a big splash. They would show up in the Style section. I thought there were a lotta people in Washington who were more terrified about showing up in that section than they were on the front page, quite honestly.

Ben Bradlee's father

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TOM BROKAW:

He only talked about his dad when he—talked to me about meeting with Samuel Eliot Morison and his father was very concerned about him being at war. And he also talked in general terms about, "We didn't have a lotta money, but we lived a good life and we had access to the privileges of my—my family's background." But that's as much as he had to say about it. It was—Ben was not a deeply reflective person about all that. He would be more interested in—what's going on. "I got a guy that I'd like to get—share with you at—NBC and—and at *The Post*, can we divide the salary?" Mostly—have a good time, talkin' about the latest gossip and what was going

on. He didn't, for me, get on the couch and say, "Well, here's where I come from and how I got to be who I am." And frankly, it was a relief.

Nixon's resignation

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TOM BROKAW:

I think in the Washington that I knew, that we can all see that it was coming. And it was just how it was gonna happen and how it would play out. And it was a great tribute to the country that there was a celebration in Lafayette Park, but the rest of the country got on with their business. My dad, who was—a Democrat—was not a Nixon fan. But—was not in a rage. He was just waiting for this to play out. Was comforted by the fact that he'd be replaced by Gerald Ford. He could identify with Gerald Ford. He thought he's an honest guy. "Tom, he makes his own English muffin in the morning. That's good for me." And I said, "Well—I think that, you know, that's good to know, frankly," that he—he does arrive without the trappings of the presidency. And so, in many ways, I think that the transition away from Nixon to Ford went smoothly in part because of who Ford was. And then, of course, he pardoned him. And had a big setback, but he didn't blink.

Watergate and Ben Bradlee's lasting legacy

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TOM BROKAW:

I think Ben's lasting legacy is mostly journalistic. I mean, you'll never be able to diminish in any way the importance and the magnitude of the Watergate story, of that paper taking on at some risk this complicated story. The single

biggest political story in the history of this country. The president was forced to resign for his felonious acts. And it may never have happened if *The Post* hadn't gotten into it early and stayed with it, and stayed with it in what I always describe is in a forensic way. That you follow the dots and then it adds up at the end of the day. And it was tough. But they got it done. And-- Ben would slap those kids on the back and say, you know, "Go do your job." And it was a great—and it changed journalism. Sometimes I thought that, you know, we had a lot of-- Woodward and—and Carl wannabees out there who would go cover the PTA bake sale and say, "Where'd you get the—chocolate chip cookies?

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TOM BROKAW:
And you say there's a dozen? Are you sure?" You know, that kinda things. But it did give us a new generation of investigative reporting. A lot of people that I've talked to over the years after I-- when I would go do commencement addresses or go do journalistic seminars, there would be these young eager beavers, and it was Woodward and Bernstein. Just like—a baseball player would wanna be Mickey Mantle or a basketball player would wanna be Michael Jordan. They wanted to be Woodward and Bernstein. That's a good thing. It gave investigative journalism an elevated place and made the country aware of its importance.

END TC: 00:50:03:00