

Howard K. Smith and the Rise of ABC News

By Philip J. Hilts

Ronald Ziegler was in a friendly mood on one of those frequent Nixon visits to the California coast. He turned to the ABC Washington bureau chief. "Why are you at ABC so uptight about being considered the House Network? What's wrong with that?" What's wrong with that is that when television people call CBS the Cronkite Broadcasting System (in honor of that man's vanity and his power in the company), and they call NBC the National Biscuit Company (noting that company's lack of bite), the most insulting acronym is still reserved for ABC. It is the Administration's Broadcasting Company.

The prime reason people view ABC news that way, as conservative and pro-Nixon, is Howard Kingsbury Smith, anchorman. In the public perception, he has become the moderating voice, the face of the Silent Majority on the tube. Of all the commentators, Smith is the most likely to say on any night, "Things are better than you think." And, says Washington producer Bill Lord, "To some people that makes him a fresh breeze in an otherwise smoggy atmosphere. . . ."

First, ABC didn't have a news show when NBC and CBS had 15-minute versions. Then, when the other nets put on half-hour news shows, ABC stayed for years with a 15-minute show. There was little or no attempt to compete in content or ratings with the big-time news operations at the other nets. "When I came here, it was really a crummy organization," says Smith. But now, the ratings are up. The company has put big-time money into news. ABC news is not far behind the

Philip J. Hilts is a free lance writer who frequently contributes to Potomac. He is working on a book on television broadcasting.



Illustrated by Vint Lawrence

other two. Howard Smith is one of the prime factors in the rise of ABC.

Though his 9 million viewers may not know it, Smith has been closer to the tight circle of the Nixon administration than almost any other newsman. He is probably the only newsman President Nixon has called personally to talk about the content or fairness of the news he wrote. Several days before publicly and thunderously threatening to resign over wiretapping charges, Henry Kissinger first made his resignation threat to Howard Smith in a private chat. Smith spoke out, day after day, year after year, and vehemently, in favor of the Johnson and Nixon war policies. And *against* the war critics—which put Smith up against the whole liberal establishment. Smith also supported Spiro Ag-

new when other newsmen were running for the battlements.

When other newsmen couldn't get within ten PR men of Richard Nixon, Howard Smith was having some private talks with him. In one of those talks, Smith says, "I told the President I agreed with him on many things.

"He said: 'I know you're with us at heart. Even though you criticize John Mitchell, I know you're still with us.'

"I told him," says Smith, "Yes, sir. I am."

When others were just saying that Charles Colson was a hatchet man for Nixon, Smith was saying that *and* having Charles Colson over to dinner.

But wait. Howard Smith bristles and gets a little defensive when people talk about his conservatism and his pro-Nixon bias. "I am a liberal," he says, while friends say he may even be radical-liberal, the most liberal of all the commentators. During his years at Oxford, he led the Labor Party of the university and gave rousing leftist speeches to the students. He was listed in *Red Channels* during the McCarthy era, a booklet purporting to name the Communists and sympathizers in the media. He was fired at CBS when his outspoken liberal views on civil rights provoked an intra-network brouhaha. Nor was he offered a job at the other two networks after that firing. He eventually joined ABC only because he went out and got a sponsor himself.

And, the whipping cream on this apparent personality split, it was no other anchorman but Howard Kingsbury Smith who first called for the impeachment or resignation of Richard Nixon.

All in the Family

It is 10 a.m. and Howard Smith still looks a little bleary-eyed as he opens the door. He is wearing plain, dark trousers and a nondescript plaid shirt that hangs open two buttons at the top. He

shuffles quickly from the front door of his home through a crafted pine hallway into the drawing room. "This is very nice," says a stunned visitor looking into the regal room. "Damn nice," says Smith as he flops his long frame down on an ornate, antique sofa.

Smith is 60 years old, a very sturdy 60. He exercises daily and co-workers at the ABC Washington Bureau say it's common to find him in the alley behind the ABC building standing on his head, or under the desk in his small cubicle doing push-ups. He quit smoking and most drinking long ago. But somehow, healthy though he is, he looks frail. Or maybe just worried.

Smith is an insular man. Friends say that his relations are somewhat formal and gentlemanly, "rather European or British than American," said one friend. He hasn't any close buddies, or friends to call up anytime he's feeling low. He avoids Washington's social scene. His family—wife, son, Jack, 29, and daughter, Catherine, 21—mark the boundaries of his intimacy.

When he works on his commentaries he works at home and alone, with no telephone on his desk, no one entering the room where he works unless it's important. He goes to the ABC bureau in Washington only at 2 p.m. every day to tape his commentaries (radio and TV), and anchor the show at 6 p.m.

At home, he works in a magnificent oval office with wood paneling and a large desk in the center. It is just off the drawing room where he is sitting, equally magnificent with its blonde, inlaid wooden floors, covered partly by oriental rugs. Three great windows (carefully crafted from designs obtained from Britain's crown architect) bathe the room in sunlight and expose a view of a great tree-bristled hill that slopes down to the rushing Potomac River. Other walls in the room are lined with shelves and books. But not just books—exquisitely bound books in red and tan leather, carrying gold titles: *The Works of John Ruskin . . . Molière . . . Carlyle . . . Robert Burns*.

Nearly everything in the drawing room was lifted whole or copied from the Smiths' English Regency home in London, where they lived for a decade. The rest of the house is filled with fragments of England: the Smiths sleep in a bed hand-

carved during the reign of James I, 360 years ago. There is more than a little of the upper-class Briton in this patrician from Louisiana.

Among the most telling things about the drawing room and Howard Smith are that the room was designed by Mrs. Howard Smith. Benedicte Traberg Smith, a tall and strong Danish woman, supervised in minute detail the construction of this room and the home, just as she supervises down to the final nail the construction of Howard Smith's life. "Bennie" books Howard's lectures, she negotiates his contract with ABC, she arranges all his travel plans and

16

goes with him on even the shortest trips.

One evening when Howard had to give a lecture shortly after his newscast, Bennie planned to bring his homemade dinner down to the office so he wouldn't miss it. Before preparing it, she called down to ABC to find out whether Howard's feet were warm or cold. She explained that if his feet were warm, she would bring a cold dinner. If they were cold, she would make something warm.

Down to the last nail.

Colleagues have wondered much about the relationship between Bennie and Howard. Some ascribe it to a weakness in his character, some to the strength of hers, and some simply say that they both like the arrangement and therefore keep it up. She takes care of things and it saves him so he can pore over, worry about, and sink himself into the most important thing: his commentary.

On the evening of December 5, 1941, says Howard K. Smith, "the same Wilhelmstrasse tipster who had told Richard C. Hottelet he was growing dangerously unpopular with the Gestapo, came to me and suggested, 'My dear Smith, if I were you I would get out of Germany as fast as I could. If you do not leave soon, you will have reason to regret it' . . ."

The commentary, which he does three times a week, is the important part of his work. The anchoring part he finds unimportant, and even distasteful. He once turned down the anchoring job when it was offered "because I didn't think I was suited to it." With a smile, he quotes someone who said anchormen are "just baritones who love to be seen on the air . . ."

He also cannot abide some of the network trappings that go with the anchor job. The network used to send him a continuous stream of ratings for the show. "I know all the networks can manipulate those figures, make them look as good as they want. So once I told them to stop sending me figures . . . I told them: 'I see a big number three up on my wall. I don't want to see any more figures until that's a big number two . . .'"

The gentleman in this gentleman-journalist is the quality which colleagues most often mention first about him. It is the most praised quality about the man but some colleagues also say that it is probably

that quality which makes Smith sometimes go soft on the administration, handle government officials too softly in interviews.

It is an attitude which allows Smith to extend his belief and trust in people in high places far past the point of some newsmen. "The Chief of State is like the flag. You have to be deferential," Smith has said, and meant it. "Howard is a puritan," says Fred Friendly. "He has a sense of integrity for people in high places that is very intense . . . He has a very high shock value . . ."

Smith Agonistes

So you can believe that it is genuine when Howard Smith, sunk down in the cushions of his sofa, droops his head a little: "I used to feel quite proud when I drove by the White House. It was a good feeling . . . But now, I avoid going by there. And I turn my eyes away when I do . . ."

In the weeks before he wrote his commentary calling for the resignation or impeachment of Richard Nixon, Smith fought it. "I tried not to take a stand," says Smith as he strokes his hair with his palm, pushing it back against his head. "It was very, very bad. I wobbled around and around on it . . ."

"I didn't want to influence the nation on a subject as severe as impeachment . . . but finally I ended up writing things I don't truly believe."

So he sat down and wrote the commentary, scrapping one version after another, until finally it was brief and simple. It ended: "I think it is not excessive to say we have been put through too much. Either the Congress, or the President by his own patriotic decision, should relieve us of a burden too heavy to carry any longer."

Smith is no longer on speaking terms with Richard Nixon. He has joined the rest of Washington journalists locked out of the White House confidence. But he recalls a chat he had with Nixon before the break: At one moment during a White House evening, Smith, always the scholar, pointed out to Nixon that after every landslide election, the winning President grew arrogant and made some terrible mistakes. "It was true with Harding, with Roosevelt after his landslide," Smith told Nixon. To which Nixon replied: "But you don't have to worry about this President. I'm going to be

very careful . . ."

The Landless Gentry

The Smiths came to Virginia in 1745, stayed briefly and then moved down to Louisiana, to a place that is still called Smith's Landing. The family was part of the Southern aristocracy, a line of gentleman-farmers. The line continued to Smith's grandfather, who was a doctor and the master of Letchworth plantation.

Continued on page 28

The Washington Post/Potomac/August 11, 1974

Smith, from page 16

But in the classic style of Southern tragedy, the debts of the plantation grew in modern years, and Smith's grandfather left a large brood of children who tried, but failed, to manage the land's affairs. Howard K. Smith Sr. was in the first Smith generation without land. He moved from job to job, working mostly as a railroad conductor. He married a Cajun, the orphaned daughter of Christopher Columbus Cates, Mississippi River steamboat pilot. Minnie Cates Smith bore Howard Jr. in Ferriday, a tiny Louisiana town that had one church and at least one shooting every Saturday night. The Smiths were poor enough in that time that Howard had to begin paying his own way before high school.

Out of this rough background came young Howard Smith Jr.—through his first 15 years a poor student, something of a rebel, and a fervent young Catholic.

It was the South in middle passage—after the Civil War and before the civil rights movement—that Smith grew up in. His family and those around him were not liberal on matters of race.

"I recall that I had Negro

playmates in my childhood, and my family warned me to stay away from them. I never could figure that out then. I never could accept it," he says.

The attitude eventually cost him the financial aid of relatives who might have helped him through school.

While on a scholarship, he did a short stint as a cub reporter for the New Orleans Item, he said. "I recall a story I had to cover across the river in Mississippi. It was a lynching. We got a call early, and I got out there while the body was still chained to the stump. It was all burned . . . it was goddam horrible.

"They didn't find out who did it, but I knew at the time that they could have if they wanted . . ."

For a man with such attitudes hardening against the South's tradition, it was inevitable that he would leave. He followed other intelligent and ambitious men in his flight. But years later, his simple egalitarian notions—Smith was never very deeply philosophical about them—would cause more explosions, personal and financial. The effects of his views on racial justice took on the trapping of a

recurring nightmare.

The War Years

Smith won a Rhodes Scholarship after being turned down the preceding year, and left the South for Merton College at Oxford. He was already a scholar of European current events, avidly political, and had written a thesis predicting war with Germany. He was in Oxford during the two turbulent pre-war years, and he joined the active Labor Party at the university. For a time he led the party in their anti-fascist and anti-Hitler campaigns and huge rallies.

But on the day the war broke out, Smith quit school to join United Press; he was sent to Berlin because of his European scholarship and his handiness in three languages.

So, Howard Smith's career in journalism began with the biggest assignment on earth: World War II. During the two years he spent covering the war from Berlin, the tension between the German government and the corps of alien reporters grew steadily. At first, open moves against correspondents were rare. But they became more common: Smith's phone was tapped, detectives were sent to watch his house, he was accosted in restaurants, and correspondents began disappearing from their homes at night.

One night very late, Smith sat in the UP office half-dozing. He had relieved Richard C. Hottelet earlier, and it was about 5 a.m. when a troop of men appeared at the door. They flashed metal discs stamped "Geheim Staatspolizei" (Gestapo). They ordered him to sit down against the wall. For several hours, they poked questions at him, and rummaged through the drawers and files in the room.

An hour before the goon

squad left, the UP wire machine ticked out the message that Dick Hortelet had been taken from his home during the night and thrown into Alexander Platz prison for "suspicion of espionage."

On the evening of December 5, 1941, says Smith, "the same Wilhelmstrasse tipster who had told Richard Hortelet he was growing dangerously unpopular with the Gestapo, came to me and suggested, 'My dear Smith, if I were you I would get out of Germany as fast as I could. If

Continued on page 30

The Washington Post/Potomac/August 11, 1974

Smith, from page 28

you do not leave soon, you will have reason to regret it . . ."

The next evening Smith left Berlin on the last train. The next day, the United States declared war and all Americans in Berlin were trapped. In Switzerland, Smith ripped out a book in six weeks, and had it smuggled out in a British diplomatic pouch to a London publisher. *Last Train From Berlin*, his first book, became a bestseller in both the United States and Britain.

It was in Switzerland that Smith married Benedicte Traberg, whom he'd met in Berlin where she was a correspondent for a Danish newspaper. Although the Smiths were safe in Switzerland, they were also trapped. They sat there for three years, until the D-Day invasion.

Not long after that night, the Smiths made a harrowing journey to Paris, where Howard got his full correspondent's credentials for CBS and joined the Americans marching to Berlin. As he had been the last to leave Berlin when the war started, he also became the first correspondent back into Berlin when the war ended. He stood by at the German surrender to Gen. Zhukov, and drank all night with the Russians in celebration.

London Idyll

The golden years for Howard K. Smith extended from the end of the war to 1957. They were,

at least, the untroubled years. He was 30 years old, and already had covered the story of the century. He became understudy to Ed Murrow, and part of a crew of broadcasters hired by Murrow who have become legend. Charles Collingwood, Eric Sevareid, Chet Huntley, William L. Shirer, David Schoenbrun, among others. They were the scholar-correspondents who created news television, who shaped it before show business captured it.

Murrow, who had been chief CBS correspondent in Europe, asked Smith to succeed him in that job in 1946. Smith lived with his wife in London, in an early 19th-century home, and "with his head in the clouds," says Alexander Kendrick, former CBS man in Europe. "Europe was his beat, and he had a 15-minute Sunday broadcast, which at that time was the height of broadcasting . . ."

Adds Kendrick: "He was not a swashbuckling foreign correspondent. He didn't wear a trenchcoat and all of that. He was a serious man who married a serious wife . . . he was intellectual . . . his head was in the clouds so much, I recall seeing a whole drawerful of paychecks in London which he had forgotten to cash. That wasn't the point for him . . ."

Kendrick recalls meeting the Smiths in Warsaw once, not long after the war. They were taking an auto tour of Eastern Europe, Smith being the first correspondent to make the tour after the war. "Polish vodka was the best there was," says Kendrick,

"and Bennie drove the car across the countryside, while Howard sat back and nipped at the vodka . . ."

And once, when Howard and Bennie attended a dull, stuffy conference in Berlin, for relief the pair went back to their hotel room and read aloud to each other from Fielding's *Tom Jones*.

Smith fit neatly into English life, and into the Murrow-created role of scholar correspondent. He was high on ideas, on history, on intellectual endeavor.

Parting is Such Sorrow

CBS News and Howard K. Smith announced today that their relations are being terminated because of a difference in interpretation of CBS News policy.

That was the full text of the announcement on October 13, 1961. It was only four years after he came back from London, only six months after they gave him the job of Washington bureau chief and commentator.

The final explosion had been building for several months in the company. And outside the company, the Smiths had been facing some shocks of their own after returning from Europe. Bennie Smith had not seen the face of racial hatred in America before. When she did, when for instance she sat in the back of a bus without knowing the convention, she was shocked by the vehemence of the feel-



Howard K. Smith conferring with co-workers in the newsroom.

The Washington Post/Potomac/August 11, 1974

ings. She had just come from a Europe still recovering from the holocaust fought over the same issue. Here again was the raw hate.

According to Smith, the dispute with CBS began when Dick Salant, head of CBS News, began to complain to Smith about the strength of his commentary. It was too much, Salant said. There was one commentary in which Smith lambasted Eisenhower for his lack of knowledge of economics. Eisenhower kept talking about balancing the budget, when "every good economist knows that that doesn't work. And every time Eisenhower tried it, there was a recession. I just thought someone should let people know some basic facts of economics," says Smith. Then there was a commentary about the Arab side in the Arab-Israeli conflict. "There was no one listening to the Arab side then, and I thought it should be explained . . ." That caused more waves. Then it got into the question

of race.

In one commentary, says Smith, "I said that in America since World War II, there has been a steady growth of a black, articulate class—educated people who will not stand for what is going on much longer. I predicted that there would be a blow-up. I didn't know what form it would take, or when it would happen. But I said Congress should act to forestall it . . ." This drew more unpleasant reaction from CBS executives.

Smith went home at night, again and again, ash-gray with anger and frustration. In January of 1961, Ed Murrow was forced out of CBS after battles over his tough journalism. The only other lightning rod for CBS corporate anger had disappeared. Howard Smith was now the number one target.

And at last it came down to a single issue. When Murrow had left, he had just begun a documentary on race called "Who Speaks for Birmingham?" He turned the documentary over to Smith,

who traveled to Birmingham in May of that year to work on it.

Smith made contact with some Ku Klux Klansmen during his research for the documentary, and one afternoon a Klansman called him: If you want to see some action, the man said, get down to the bus station. He gave Smith a time to be at the terminal.

Smith arrived, and waited.

The Washington Post/Potomac/August 11, 1974

A busload of freedom riders was due in soon. Just before its scheduled arrival, Smith noticed the street and terminal were suddenly empty of police. In their place, thugs began to wander into the terminal and wait.

The bus arrived. The freedom riders began to get off, and the thugs dived for them. They beat them to the ground while Smith watched. One man's face was ripped to a bloody mess at Smith's

shoes. Another man was hammered until he was paralyzed. Permanently, it turned out.

Smith took some of the less bloody riders back to his hotel room with him to get their story. Out of the material he wrote a radio story, complete with the names of some of those who organized the assault.

According to Smith's version, Smith soon got a call from Blair Clark, Dick Salant's assistant as head of CBS news. "You're suspended," said Clark.

"The thing which really got them," says Smith, "was a three-column story in the New York Times praising me, praising me for breaking their rules . . ." The "rules", as CBS saw them, were that commentary was forbidden, analysis was all right. No one at CBS was ever able to define those words and their differences. But the rules stuck anyway.

In putting together the Birmingham documentary, the network executives again got sensitive. They asked Smith to rewrite it. He refused. The management especially balked at the last line of the piece, a quote from Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

CBS ordered the quote excised from the story. The chafing grew worse between Smith and the CBS executives, and he recalls conversations with Dick Salant in which Salant berated him, "You don't obey our rules!" Smith replied: "But I don't know what your rules are . . . I don't understand them."

Finally, William Paley, head of CBS, asked Smith to write out his view of the analysis-commentary issue and Smith was then invited up to New York to talk.

Smith's version:

It was a luncheon in the executive's cafeteria at CBS. Present were CBS chairman Paley, CBS president Frank Stanton, CBS News president

Continued on page 34

Smith, from page 31

Dick Salant, and Howard Smith. The lunch began with Paley pulling out from his pocket Smith's essay on comment and analysis.

Paley threw the paper across the table at Smith, and said contemptuously, "We've read all this stuff before . . ."

Smith stuffed the document in his pocket and coldly told Paley: "I don't agree with you . . ."

Said Paley: "Then you better go somewhere else . . ."

Smith says now that "I knew Stanton and Salant were shocked. But I wasn't. Paley was a strong-willed man, and I knew he expected me to back down. But I wasn't going to do that. Not at all . . . The whole thing was really the result of Paley's meddling in the news. He would come in every two weeks or so and hand down a new dictum . . . This was just one of them."

Just before he exited CBS, executives offered to Smith a statement that had been drawn up for the press saying that Smith and CBS had amicably settled their differences. "Horses . . ." said Smith.

"We did not."

So Howard Kingsbury Smith's 20-year career at CBS ended suddenly one afternoon, with 24 words of parting, beginning, "CBS News and Howard K. Smith announced today that their relations are being terminated . . ." Smith got the company to agree that neither side would talk about the dispute to the press, or the public. He felt that without the vow of silence, he would have to combat a dozen full-time flacks working to make CBS look good and Howard Smith look bad.

Salant now refuses to talk about the Smith break with CBS, saying only, "That was 13 years ago! It's dead and buried . . . Smith is a damn fine journalist. Period." (Paley was out of the country and could not be reached for comment.)

On the Shelf

At 47 years old, Howard Smith was unemployed. Though he was a star newsman, with an excellent record of scholarship and reporting and all the

awards winnable on his shelf, NBC and ABC avoided him. "I wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole," Alex Kendrick quotes ABC News chief Jim Hagerty as saying. Hagerty was a Republican, a former Eisenhower press secretary, and Smith was a red hot liberal with a backbone besides. NBC uttered not a word.

He was quickly offered a job as Assistant Secretary of State by John F. Kennedy, but he turned it down. He wanted to stay in journalism, and finally, an insurance company run by an old liberal friend offered to sponsor nearly any program Smith would put together. They finally decided on a news-and-comment show, and offered it, money and all, to ABC. ABC accepted the offer, even though they hadn't the facilities at the time to put on the show. ABC also protected itself by writing into the contract no liability for the company, and all of it for Howard Smith. If Smith got in legal or libel trouble with the show, ABC would wash its hands.

It wasn't long, of course, before Smith did get himself in trouble. He was at his old

leftist tricks again, said the John Birch Society: he had done a program in 1962 called "The Political Obituary of Richard Nixon" and appearing with a brief comment on the Nixon character was Alger Hiss. Though the program was weighted in Nixon's favor on the whole, the brief Hiss segment drew blood. Nixon's comment came through Herb Klein: "A new low in undistinguished reporting . . . it set out to kick Richard Nixon and accomplished its goal . . ." Birchers spoke about the "convicted Communist Hiss" and Smith's own pink shade.

Jim Hagerty, ABC News Chief who had once wanted to avoid hiring Smith, now backed up Smith, even against the comments of all his fellow Republicans. But even though ABC did not abandon Smith, it did pasture him.

Like his exile in Switzerland, caught in the middle of the war and unable to get to it, Smith was caught in television and unable to work on it. "They simply gave me very little to do after that," says Smith. He pleaded with Elmer

Lower, ABC News head, "to give me something important and regular to do . . . Well, they waited a year and then let me do the election coverage. I told them that was not enough . . ." But still he got nothing. It was a time of strain, a time when "he had been given up for dead by an awful lot of people," said Fred Friendly, former CBS News boss, "things sank pretty low."

The Break

Howard Smith made his plans to break with television. He took up a regular newspaper column. He lectured. He signed a fat contract with a publisher to do a voluminous work on Lyndon Johnson. He hired assistants to help him keep up with research and filing. The Smiths knew from their very successful writing friends like William L. Shirer (*Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*) that the Smith money (over \$200,000 a year from ABC alone) and fame would never be the same again. But they were ready, and began to

Continued on page 12

Smith, from page 34
cut the umbilical.

But that, too, soured. Smith was on leave from ABC to write the Johnson book, but he was still under contract and did some commentary and election coverage. Smith wrote furiously on the book for a while, then took a break and did more election coverage, and more commentaries. When he took the break, other events started occurring. Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not run again, thus changing all the political facts and futures of the Johnson story. Smith slid back into full-time television, and gave up the attempt to break with the box.

When producer Av Westin moved from CBS to ABC and began producing the ABC Evening News, he had some power over what went on in the show. He told Smith that, "We should put you on the air with a commentary every night. . ."

Smith by now accustomed to a rocky career, flipped back: "I'll believe that when I see it."

He did see it. He began with commentaries. Then in May of 1969, he became half of the co-anchor with Frank Reynolds. Reynolds was replaced by Harry Reasoner, and Smith stayed on as co-anchor. The ABC ratings began a great rise in 1969, when Westin became producer and Smith and Reynolds took the anchor jobs. They grew even more when Reasoner got fed up with being second fiddle at CBS and came to ABC. The ratings grew to a point last year when ABC was only a shadow away from NBC and a little more behind CBS.

Smith was now part of a success formula, again on top, perhaps as he had been some 30 years before, when he became chief European correspondent. He was part of a euphoria at ABC: for the first time, ABC was a contender. Said one correspondent, "Be-

fore Westin, before Smith and Reasoner, there was no ABC Evening News. Nobody cared about us. We didn't care about us. Now we not only exist, we are competing."

The Nightly News

Smith walks into the back door of the ABC Washington bureau in mid-afternoon. He's wearing a plain brown suit, with a

fashionably colored shirt and multi-colored tie, and dark glasses. The shirt and tie are not his idea: he's an extremely conservative dresser. But for the sake of his appearance on the air, ABC director Ace Armstrong picks out shirts and ties for him to wear.

He walks into his tiny office tucked away in a corner of the building. Its walls are layered with honors. He has already written several commentaries, one of which he will choose and pare down before air time. He will also sift through the news of the day, and pick out the lead item and perhaps one or two more to write himself. The rest of the anchor writing is handled by Steve Steinberg, his chief writer.

Steinberg, a curly-haired and jovial man, tries to match his style to the speaking habits and story preferences of Smith. For example, you will not hear Smith say the word "particularly" on the air. Steinberg doesn't use it because Smith can't pronounce it. And Smith likes to set up stories with historical background. Says Steinberg with a grin: "If it was up to Howard, everything in the show would begin: 'On July 4, 1776 . . .'"

Through the producers'

pen, and down 20 yards to the studio: Smith walks it a few minutes before 6 p.m. with his young secretary, Petie Bonbrest. He's already done the radio commentary, and the television commentary is on tape. Now it is just the show's Washington anchor.

When the camera's red light goes on, Smith is sitting on an old chair behind a painted plywood box. Behind him is a blank screen.

But viewers see none of that; they see a large image of Howard Smith and behind him a light show in flashing art, color, and pictures.

And the viewers don't really see Howard Smith either. They see a man without a past, without a private life, without an intellectual struggle before taking a side. There are only opinions.

And in that way, Howard Smith is a victim of Vietnam. It went on for years, and through those years Smith went on the air night after night supporting the war, staking out his position. When Agnew began to attack the media, the sides formed up the same way. It was another Vietnam debate in disguise. And Smith took up the side of Agnew, and spoke

about how badly the press was handling the war.

When the hot debate on Vietnam cooled, the administration remembered its friends and enemies. So Smith found himself closer to the administration than other newsmen, and found the public perception of himself hardened. Yes. He's on that side. Of course.

"But I hated that war," Smith says. "I just felt something had to be done there. My ideas on it were shaped by Adolf Hitler, by what I saw in Germany. . . there are some powers that represent an aggressive force. . ." Smith

felt that Communism in Asia was such a force. He saw the activity in Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, "and I thought the whole thing would fall apart. . ."

Though Smith thinks that it didn't have much effect on his judgment of the issues in Vietnam, there is one other factor which some have said held sway in Smith's perception of Vietnam.

His son Jack went to Vietnam, and was caught in a desperate battle in Ia Drang valley. He was wounded three times, and his body was covered with blood. He lay motionless on the ground while the Viet Cong moved around and over him, shooting the wounded Americans in the back of the neck so they wouldn't have to take prisoners. They took him for dead, and left him there. He lay on the ground for 21 hours before he had a chance to crawl away from the battlefield to find a radio and call for help.

In a commentary in 1969, Smith talked about newspapers and television, and he struck on something about his own split image: ". . . We in television are vastly more vivid. We have the problem an oriental dancer has and the ballroom dancer does not have: we both have appendectomy scars, but ours show."

The scars Smith got over Vietnam show. They have become an identifying mark.

ABC has used the Smith-conservative identification to advantage in the ratings, they believe, and Smith hasn't often shunned chances to get interviews or information.

So Howard K. Smith works warily in television, which has so often tested his backbone and conscience; and he works uneasily in the anchor-man's job, which he finds shallow. And he lives, a little uncomfortably, with his current image. ■