Chairman Paley, Critic Murrow

These are excerpts from David Halberstam's "CBS: The Power & the Profits," the first of a two-part profile running in the January and February editions of The Atlantic. Halberstam's thesis is that profits, more than the public interest, govern television news programming. These segments outline that problem and trace how it gradually eroded the relationship of CBS Chairman William Paley and his close friend and most noted newscaster, the late Edward R. Murrow. The CBS profile will eventually comprise part of a book by Halberstam on how information technology has shifted the roots of power in American society. The following is printed with permission of The Atlantic.

Paley had pioneered in an industry that was in a perpetual state of revolution, and mastered it and stayed on top. And yes, CBS was the best, but the doubts persisted, and what was more, they persisted among those who knew by far the most about CBS, those who had worked there and who knew the difference between the reality and the potential of network broadcasting, the difference between what was and what might have been. Of the two very powerful drives working on Bill Paley—the wish to make a profit, to drive CBS's stock and profit ever upward, and the sense of excellence and responsibility to the public—the second thrust had clearly diminished over the years. The dominant thrust, ever more powerful, was for greater profit, almost always at the expense of public time and public service or of willingness to experiment in quality programming in the arts or public affairs. What was lacking was a modest sense of balance. More, the trend was not good, for as television time became more expensive and thus more valuable, the cost of experimentation grew higher and the potential loss of revenue far greater.

The networks always had an excuse or a scapegoat for whatever they chose to do or not to do (the ratings, the affiliates, the FCC). The CBS public relations machinery was able to single out a play at Christmastime, or a documentary like "The Selling of the Pentagon," or claim that the network was doing very daring things in its situation comedies (whites with blacks

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and blacks with whites). For if public affairs programs were sponsored and made a profit, that was not good enough; CBS demanded superprofit, the kind that came from dominating a key section of prime time, so that its share of a minute was worth two or three times as much as the (quite profitable) minute of the opposition. That was profit, that was the ratings, and no one was better at the TV supermoney game than Bill Paley and CBS.

Paley has lived a rich and full life, enjoying his money and getting the full benefit of it. His social accomplishments have been at least as considerable as his business ones. He married one of the three fabled Cushing girls of Boston, Barbara Cushing Mortimer, a lady at once beautiful, gracious, and social. That gained him Jock Whitney as a brother-in-law and Mrs. Vincent Astor as a sister-in-law. A whole new world opened to him; eventually, in his progress through it, he became president and subsequently chairman of the Museum of Modern Art. A man who wanted the best in everything, he now had the ultimate wife, a woman who was Vogue magazine sprung to life, who looked like Vogue and dressed like Vogue and lived in homes where Vogue would be at ease. If Bill Paley cared about taste, then the second Mrs. William Paley — Babe — was perfect because she *was* taste, she was an arbiter of style by instinct and by nature; where she went, taste and style followed. She was, pronounced designer Halston, "The number one fashion personality in America because all women notice her — and men too."

(Enter Ed Murrow.) In 1937 a job opened up for a head of CBS's European division. It was, in effect, a business job, involving scheduling prominent Europeans for CBS broadcasts. It was not a journalistic job at the start. For a time it appeared likely to go to a young man named Fred Willis, who was charming, sociable, and graceful. A colleague asked Willis about the rumor, since the job was considered something of a plum. No, answered Willis, he had thought it over, but he wanted a real future at the company, and the one thing he was sure of was that you should never be that far from headquarters. So the job went instead to Edward R. Murrow.

Murrow. The right man in the right place in the right era. An innately elegant man in an innately inelegant

profession. A rare figure, as good as his legend. His presence was so strong that it still lives. In many ways, because he was what he was, CBS News is today what it is. He was shy and often withdrawn in personal conversation, but totally controlled and brilliant as a communicator. His voice was steeped in civility, intelligence, and compassion. He was a man who, much as Lindbergh did, spanned the oceans and shortened distance and heightened time. He helped make radio respectable as a serious journalistic profession, and more than a decade later, simply by going over to television, had a good deal to do with making that journalistically legitimate too. He was, in a way, more an educator than a journalist. His own career and the technological revolution he was a part of helped mark America's transformation from a post-Depression isolationist nation to a major international superpower. His very voice bridged the ocean, brought Europe (and thus potentially threatening alien powers) closer, and made its presence more immediate and more complicated. He helped educate the nation in the process of entering the larger world. He also helped inaugurate an era in which the very speed of communication became a form of power.

As the best of English society was open to Murrow, so was it open to his boss, Colonel William S. Paley. Paley took a leave from CBS and went to London in 1943 to serve on Eisenhower's psychological warfare staff. A friendship with Murrow, whom he had barely known before, was immediately forged. They were often joined by Charles Collingwood, and the three strikingly handsome young men were seen at the best places, often with the best-looking women. Paley was close to young correspondents then. They were heroes, and he was impressed with their intelligence, courage, the risks those boys took in reporting from wartime Europe. And, in no matter what city, they seemed to know just the right people. Those who know Paley believe that during the war in England he sensed for the first time the true social possibilities that his power might generate ..., Not that he was frivolous—he was still the relentless, driving businessman—but he was less open, less accessible. His friends were changing, they were more social, more from the upper reaches of the business world. There was a gradually diminishing number of people who might argue with him or dispute him.

The Paley-Murrow friendship survived their return home. Paley still liked having Murrow around him, and why not? In the afterglow of the great war, Murrow was the most prestigious journalist in the country. At Paley's urging, Murrow became a vice president of CBS. This was a mistake, since he had neither the talent nor the inclination for administration, and he soon found himself speaking for the company, and having to defend CBS policies with which he did not necessarily agree. But that did not bother either man at the start; Paley offered Murrow a house in Manhasset, Long Island, next to his own (the offer was not accepted). If the relationship was nice for Paley it was also good for Murrow and the news department. Easy access to the Chairman meant access to air time. It was a built-in protection for correspondents. It seemed to symbolize the strength and importance of the news division within the company, the invulnerability to the pressures outside.

Anyone doubting Murrow's power and influence, or misjudging the priority Paley seemed to place on news, had only to know about the guest list for Paley's second wedding, in 1947, his marriage to Barbara Cushing Mortimer. The wedding was very small and select: her family, not his; her world, not his. Just before the wedding, Paley went to an associate at CBS to ask for camera film and to explain that despite their close professional relationship, no business colleagues or friends of his were being invited. A very small party, just family, Paley emphasized. The friend understood, and did not mind until after the wedding, when Paley dropped off the film to be developed. The associate looked at some of the shots, and saw, yes, it was small, Bill and Babe, and the family, and Jock Whitney, and there was ... Edward R. Murrow. Since the associate who lent the camera and film, Dr. Frank Staton, had become the president of CBS a year earlier, and since he had come to resent both Murrow's fame and his personal closeness to Paley, the incident did not soon leave Stanton's mind. Nearly 15 years later, asked by mutual friends why he could not close the terrible breach with Murrow, since both of them were by then ostensibly working toward the same essential goals, Stanton would mention this incident as part of the problem—Murrow was a guest at Bill and Babe Paley's wedding; Stanton was not. The nerve was still that raw.

(1954.) The Murrow-McCarthy show

was significant first because it took so long in coming, second because it loomed so large over what was clearly so low a landscape, and third because it caused such a storm. It would have been unforgivable for television and for a team with the reputation of the Murrow-Friendly group to fail to do a major documentary on McCarthy. It would have rendered television in general, and CBS and Murrow in particular, a joke. From the start, the real question raised by Joe McCarthy was not what he was—that was self-evident — but rather which journalists and networks would have the courage to say what he was. From the start he was reckless and shallow; the only thing real about him was the fear he generated. For he came on the scene at a volatile time. America blown overnight to great power status, the Soviets with atomic weapons. His was an essential challenge to freedom of speech, and an astonishing number of people were cowed, to a greater or lesser extent, into retreating before the demagogic challenge. This was true of print journalism and even more true of electronic journalism. If the center did not fold, it did not exactly hold, either. Murrow was a man of the center; he was the best of broadcasting. So it was natural that in 1952 and 1953 friends began to ask Murrow and Friendly, (producer Fred Friendly) when they were going to take on McCarthy. When? It was a very good question.

For a year before the McCarthy broadcast, the "See It Now" team had been told to start collecting film. No date for broadcasting the show had been set. Murrow's own failure to act was becoming an issue among journalistic colleagues. Yes, he had done some shows which touched on civil liberties, on people being pressured by forms of McCarthyism. But he had not gone after McCarthy himself. When the subject came up he answered yes, the show would be done, but he was searching for the right vechicle. When colleagues and friends were, as they often were, somewhat more insistent, and demanded that he go on and take the extraordinary forum of television and make an attack upon McCarthy, Murrow pulled back. No, he couldn't do that. It wouldn't do any good. He was aware of the problem, he said, and aware of the force of television, but it wouldn't do any good for him to simply go on television and make a speech against McCarthy. His friends were often not satisfied with his answer, and for that matter, neither was he. For he knew, better than most, that what a journalist chooses not to see is often as important as what he chooses to see.

In late February of 1954, Murrow and Friendly began to move ahead on the show. Those who knew him well believe that Murrow knew the Army was also going to attack McCarthy; he realized that he could delay no longer. Reports were circulating that McCarthy might go after Murrow; the senator was already telling people that he had documents proving that Murrow was a communist. Murrow warned everyone on the staff what might lie ahead and asked if they had anything to hide, anything which might come out later and embarrass them. At the same time CBS's lawyers began to go through every aspect of Murrow's own past, in preparation for McCarthy's expected counterchallenge.

Murrow was uneasy about using television in what would inevitably be so personal a fashion. McCarthy had broken the rules of civilized political behavior; this meant that any journalist portraying him accurately would similarly have to break his own rules and built-in restrictions. When he finally decided on the vehicle for taking on Mc Carthy, it was a simple one. He would let McCarthy destroy McCarthy; "the terror," Murrow said, after screening some footage of the senator, "is in this room."

Murrow and Friendly kept the idea of their show a secret inside CBS as long as possible, on the assumption that the less the 20th floor knew, the better. That was fine with the 20th floor. Paley was not about to order Murrow not to do a McCarthy show, nor was he likely to order him to do one. But he was not eager to be associated with it, and he kept as much institutional distance as possible between the show and CBS. No, CBS would not advertise the program or allow the CBS logo "eye" to be used. So Murrow and Friendly bought their own ad and paid for it out of their own pockets and signed it with their own names. No, Paley, when asked, did not want to screen the show before it ran. Both Murrow and Paley knew what his reaction would be. Ed, do we really have to do this? Paley did suggest that Murrow offer McCarthy equal time. Murrow had been thinking of that too, that it had the advantage, when McCarthy demanded equal time, of not looking as if they were backing down. They also asked Sig Mickelson, nominal head of CBS News (In fact Murrow and Friendly were practically running a separate shop, which was known as Tobruk), if he wanted to look at it, but Mickelson declined. He had screened nothing else of theirs. So the most potent and sensitive television show of a decade went on the air without any screening by CBS superiors. A decade later it would be very different.

Just before the McCarthy show was to be broadcast, at 10:30 p.m., March 9, a call came through to Murrow from Paley: "Ed, I'm with you today, and I'll be with you tomorrow." A nice call . .

On April 27, 1965, Ed Murrow died of lung cancer. Murrow had left CBS in 1961 to head USIA. He had suffered a long and painful and exhausting illness. That night CBS, under the direction of the man who was now head of news, Fred Friendly, broadcast a memorial program "to the most distinguished commentator in our history." It was made up of tapes from his television broadcasts, and voice-over from his radio days, accompanied by still photos. It was powerful and moving, not least because those friends of his who happened to narrate it — Sevaried and Collingwood — had the best voices in broadcasting. The afternoon before it was aired, Friendly received a phone call from one of Paley's PR people.

Is anyone going to speak for the company? the man inquired.

Friendly answered that he didn't know what that meant. This was a show, he said, about Ed Murrow, who had worked for CBS.

Are you going to be on? the PR man asked.

No, said Friendly, it was going to be very simple, Murrow and some of his boys.

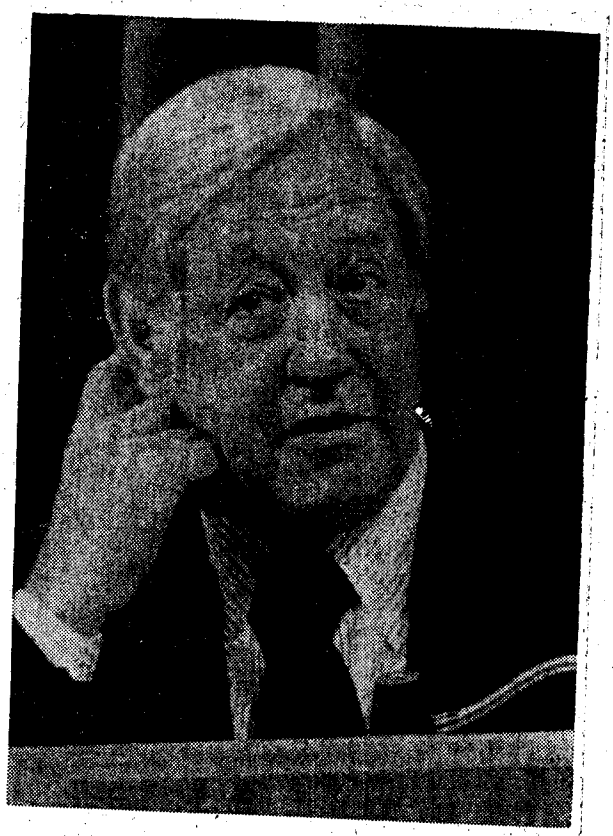
What do you think, said the PR man, of the idea of the Chairman going on for two minutes?

Oh, said Friendly, slightly taken aback, do you think he really wants to?

Yes, said the PR man, I'm very sure he'd like to.

So on the occasion of the death of Edward R. Murrow, William S. Paley, who had done so much to make him and almost as much to break him, and who wanted to be sure that the company got credit for Murrow, went on the air to say that Ed Murrow had symbolized the golden age of broadcasting, and that there would soon be another golden age.

In 1973, as the Watergate scandals unfolded, Janet Murrow watched television news regularly. She often felt frustrated by the lack of commentary. Of the varying commentators, she thought that Bill Moyers most resembled Ed. But he was not on the networks; he was on public television. Her son, Casey Murrow, lived in Vermont and taught school. He did not own a television set.



William S. Paley: "He has no equal in politics or in business. In an age where political and corporate structures have been arranged so no one can be held accountable, he may be our last autocrat."

Mirror, Mirror: Reflections,

Reactions and the CBS Empire

By Sander Vanocur

If information is power, then CBS Chairman William S. Paley is the most powerful man in the United States.

He has no equal in politics or in business. In an age where political and corporate structures have been arranged so that no one can be held accountable for their acts, where decisions are reached by committee so that no one can be linked to failure, Paley may be our last autocrat.

Autocrats do not like criticism. Neither do lesser beings. The difference lies in the power of the autocrat to counter it, using information to counter other information. We are now in the midst of what historians may one day call Paley's "counter-information."

The movement may be officially dated from last July when CBS began to react to Robert Metz's "CBS: Reflections in a Bloodshot Eye," a somewhat slapdash history of Paley and CBS, the two being synonymous. The CBS reaction to the book was excessive. The book should have been ignored.

Television

A new look at CBS and Paley in the current issue of The Atlantic cannot be ignored. It is the first installment of a two-part series by David Halberstam, author of "The Best and the Brightest," that forms a central part of a new book on how technological change has redefined who holds power in the United States and how power is exercised — from the ways computers have altered the information process to the massive impact of a fleeting TV image.

It is not being ignored. It could not be. Halberstam traces the rise of CBS to its present role as leader of the broadcasting industry and how the rise of the company and its insistence on ever greater corporate profits has affected Paley's special relationship with his news department, a relationship which Paley had fostered through his close friendship with the late Edward R. Murrow.

Halberstam's conclusion in the first article will not be easy for Paley to accept — that he abandoned Murrow in

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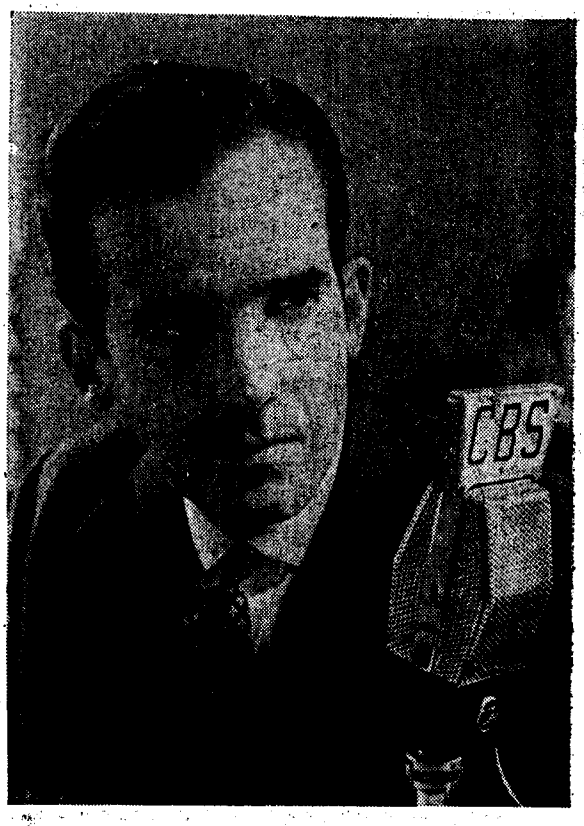
the late '50s after Murrow went before a meeting of radio and television news directors in Chicago to denounce what television was showing its vast audience. According to Halberstam, "Paley was furious; Murrow had betrayed him, had fouled his own nest. Ed Murrow had betrayed the man who, in Bill Paley's view at least, had made him rich and famous."

It is difficult for those who were born after World War II to understand how important a figure Murrow was in broadcast journalism. From his broadcasts from London during the war until the rise of Huntley and Brinkley, he was the sole dominant voice on radio and television. There was Murrow and then there was everyone else.

CBS has a curious corporate personality split about Murrow. In the late '50s, CBS made him virtually a nonperson before he left the network to become director of the U.S.I.A. in the Kennedy administration. But from time to time, CBS celebrates the memory of Murrow by showing some of his celebrated documentaries. It is even considering a dramatic program based on Murrow's life, something similar in form to the two-hour drama it aired this fall on John Henry Faulk, a CBS entertainer who lost his job after he was blacklisted by anti-communist vigilantes.

How CBS can [illegible] this off will be interesting. The Faulk drama made no mention of either Paley or Frank Stanton, the number two man at CBS during those days. Can CBS show a drama about Murrow without getting into what happened to his relationships with Paley and Stanton? If the drama does not, do Paley and others at CBS think this will go unnoticed?

Perhaps they do. Television is, after all, a medium that can rearrange and alter our perceptions of reality and



Edward R. Murrow: "It is difficult for those born after World War II to understand how important a figure Murrow was in broadcast journalism...There was Murrow and then there was everyone else."

does so on a daily basis. Why not history? Great men worry about history. They wonder what will be said of them after they are gone from the scene. Some try to tidy up all the loose ends while they still have the power to do so. Why let others build your memorial while you still have the power to commission its design?

This may be the reason why Paley has commissioned Martin Mayer, author of "About Television" and "The Bankers," to write a history of CBS News. Mayer does not know what CBS intends to do with it. Neither, at this time, does CBS, though it appears designed to be issued either to stockholders or affiliates next year, when CBS celebrates its 50th anniversary. If CBS changes or edits the history, Mayer says it then becomes a company document and his name will be removed from it.

A commissioned history of CBS News, a projected drama about Murrow on CBS ... It is obvious that a raw nerve has been touched, a nerve that reached back in time to the moment when two giants, Paley and Murrow, joined together to create an excellence in broadcast journalism that has never since been touched.

One of those giants is gone. The other remains with certain loose ends of history that must be tidied and perhaps rearranged. That is the privilege of great and powerful men. Paley has his own sense of his relationship with Murrow. His commissioned history will have its own special sense. Reporters such as Halberstam will have theirs. We will know in time. But perhaps it is now in order to ask for a modicum of charity on the part of Paley and CBS where the memory of Ed Murrow is involved. He served both well when he lived. There is no more he can do for them now. Let him rest in peace.