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Huntley Finds Life Has Its Drawbacks

BOZEMAN, Mont. July 21 (AP)—Chet Huntley of the Huntley-Brinkley news telecast says Life magazine incorrectly quoted him as saying it "frightens me" that Richard M. Nixon is president.

In a letter to the Bozeman Chronicle, Huntley declared Monday that he actually said he "worried about all presidents of the United States—whether they will stay healthy, whether they can stand the strain, their power, the decisions they make, and our tendency to make monarchs out of them."

In New York a Life spokesman declined immediate comment, pointing out that neither Huntley nor his employer, NBC, had complained to the magazine.

Huntley, 58, retires from the telecast after the Friday night show and will devote full time to developing a Montana recreational complex.

The newscaster also disowned another quote in the Life interview: "The shallowness of the man—President Nixon—overwhelms me."

In disclaiming that quote, Huntley said he had ventured the judgment that the 1968 campaign, as waged by all candidates, was shallow and that the President's rationale for Cambodia was thin.

"But that was transformed into the statement that I think Mr. Nixon was shallow," Huntley said.

CHET HUNTLEY
. . . good night, Life!

Huntley also denied having said he had "poured Scotch" for President Johnson.

"Well, so it goes," concluded Huntley. "The only reasonably accurate quote was the one about the Eastern Establishment."

In that passage the newscaster was quoted as saying "Spiro Agnew is appealing to the most base of elements" and that the networks had "almost created" Agnew through intensive news coverage.

Half of Huntley-Brinkley signs off the air

Chet Heads for the Hills

by THOMAS THOMPSON

When Chet Huntley and David Brinkley first materialized for a national audience in 1956, a fellow could swim in Lake Erie, planes landed on time in New York, the U.S. had 600 or so "advisers" in Vietnam, and in Baltimore a lawyer named Spiro Agnew had not yet even run for the presidency of his local PTA.

Now Chet Huntley is leaving, going back to Montana, taking away that sonorous voice of dignity which seemed not so much merely to deliver the news, but to drop it on us as an offending object; realizing, at 58, that it is important for the boy to come to New York, but even more vital for the man to go home. The other day he was cleaning up in his office at NBC, rummaging about his rolltop desk with an old buffalo rifle hanging precariously over it, next to the framed memo his father wrote in 1923 ordering all trains of the Northern Pacific line to pause for five minutes in memory of President Harding's passing. Huntley's office is a place where books are tumbling out of shelves, where papers are strewn about like autumn leaves, where two brass spittoons do not even look out of place beside the desk. "I wanted to get these damn deadlines off my neck," he said. "Jesus, six nights a week, night after night after night . . . the noise . . . the clamoring for attention . . . the divisions in our society. . . . When you deliver it night after night you start feeling almost *responsible* for it. . . . I'm not running away from things, I'm running away to think. Maybe where there's clarity of air, there's clarity of thought."

Earlier this midsummer week he had given up his NBC radio programs which, in truth, he relished more than his nightly television duties because the radio work was entirely his own. He wrote his thoughts, edited them, spoke them. "I came in this morning," he said, "and for the first time in 15 years didn't know what to do with myself."

At 6:10 he wound through a familiar maze of corridors, stopping in a room with a wall mirror. He found a can of face powder and flopped some on his forehead. "The guy is seldom here so I do it myself," he said. There are pouches under the eyes and a paunch growing about the middle, but he remains a strong, fine-looking man.

"Do you have to change clothes?" I asked, untactfully implying that his slightly bagging gray trousers, his blazer with the threads hanging from the back, his shirt with the fray at the collar, his inexpertly knotted tie needed repair before exposure to 20 million watchers.

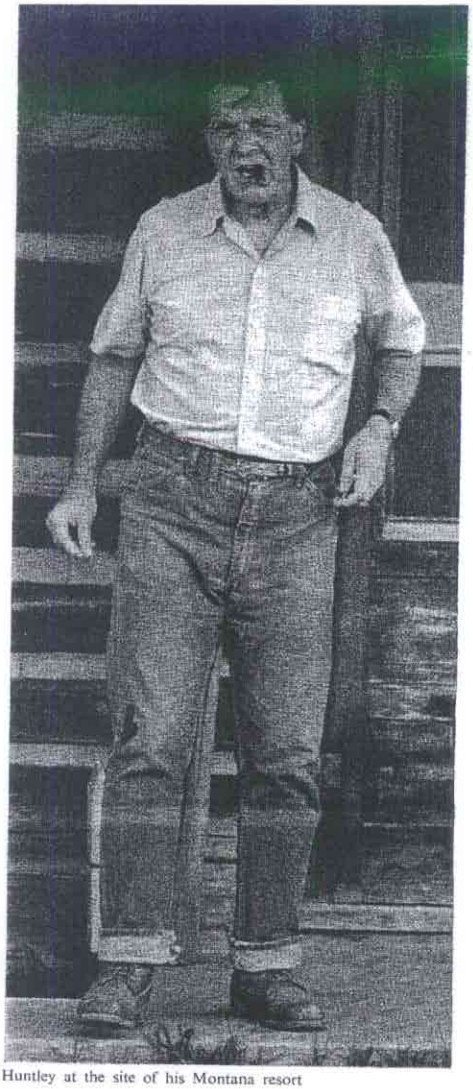
"Nah," he said.

He slipped behind a desk in the studio, technicians darted about him, maps and severed heads of famous people flashed in rehearsal on screens fore and aft, and promptly at 6:30 EST, the voice rolled out: "Chet Huntley, NBC News, New York." Everything was made right. Suddenly he seemed sartorially splendid. Suddenly all was majesty. Vocal cords, not clothes, can make the man.

Only rarely has that voice betrayed him. In the first year of the partnership, in the year when everybody at NBC agreed the idea to pair them was a disaster, when for several months in 1957 there was not a single sponsored minute, in that year Huntley sometimes had to bite his inside cheek to keep from breaking up at Brinkley. The voice trembled in 1963 as President Kennedy's coffin went to its grave, and again on the night Martin Luther King Jr. was shot, and it cracked in anger that last night in Chicago of the Democratic Convention. But in the main it has been one of the few constants left.

"I've tried to cast myself as the voice of restraint around here," he said later. "That night in Chicago I was mad, but when we had an on-camera bull session after the convention shut down, I pointed out that there was a definite brat element out there in the streets, that it was not a total slaughter of the innocents."

In the bars of Rockefeller Center where the network people drink, there is gossip that Huntley was pushed. It isn't true. He had more than two years to run on his $300,000-a-year contract, and the Huntley-Brinkley ratings, which in the past few years have occasionally been topped by competing Walter Cronkite on CBS, have about pulled back into a dead heat. NBC, which counts on its hyphenated news show to bring in almost 30 millions of revenue annually, one of its largest pots of gold, is frankly terrified. Said a network executive: "Johnny Carson we can replace someday—we replaced Jack Paar—and another *Laugh-In* will always turn up. But the chemistry with Chet and David was an accident, a freak, it won't happen again."



Huntley at the site of his Montana resort

NBC will replace Huntley with veterans Frank McGee and John Chancellor, who with Brinkley will make up a three-man team. But there will be no attempt to create a trio to rival the old duet. "We won't have a lot of people saying good night to each other, that's for sure," says NBC News head Reuven Frank.

In truth, Huntley beat Brinkley to retirement. "I'm always mumbling about leaving," said Brinkley, "because 14 years is an incredible grind for this sort of thing. I'm talking about the work, because the relationship between Chet and me has been entirely cordial. Incredible as it may seem, in 14 years we haven't had one unpleasant word together. Maybe that's because we've usually been 250 miles apart."

Huntley is so eager to go back to his own

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'I thought I was the classic liberal'

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country that he plans, on the morning after the last newscast on August 1, to lock the door of his East Side town house and fly with Tippy directly to Bozeman, Montana. Tippy, who was once a weather girl for a Washington TV station, is Huntley's second wife. He and his first wife were divorced in 1959 and have two grown daughters. The house rising in Montana is the first part of Huntley's dream, begun only 18 months ago, but rapidly coming to fruition. The dream is Big Sky, a 15,000-acre resort development in the lap of 11,000-foot Lone Mountain, a $15 million complex of condominiums, hotels, restaurants, a summer village for hiking and fishing and swimming, and a winter village for skiing.

It is Huntley's passionate intent to build his complex out of native Montana wood and stone and to nestle it discreetly in the environment. But already there is sniping from people who would rather the wilderness be left alone. "There's a ringleader of the opposition who claims I'm going to bring in marijuana, heroin and naked women."

What Huntley *will* be bringing in —besides drop-around friends—is a profound concern about the currents of American life and a hope that he can sort something out in his mind. "I don't know what I believe anymore," he says. "I thought I was the classic liberal, and God knows I still am in the matter of racial equality, but I'm certainly not an economic one anymore. Back in '37 or '38, I felt the government was the answer to all our problems. But the federal government, I've concluded, is now an insufferable jungle of self-serving bureaucracies."

One of Huntley's first decisions at Big Sky must be whether to install a cable for television; there is no reception there now and he is tempted to keep it that way. When the resort is fully operative, its chairman will find time for writing. First perhaps will be a memoir of his early years in radio in the 1930s. Then may come a reflection of the television years and only then will people really know what went on behind the stoic face and delivery.

Some hints:

▸ "Covering the astronauts was an exercise in boredom. The networks all got trapped. Most astronauts are dull as hell, nice guys, mechanics. The only ones who had a mind of their own didn't last long."

▸ "It deeply concerns me that 55% of the American people are getting most of their news from TV. These are people who, for the most part, are being confronted with news for the first time. And these are the people who form the Agnew claque."

▸ "Of the Presidents I've been around, I think I liked L.B.J. best. He was kind to me. As insufferable as he could be, he was a gracious and funny man at ease. I never tried to argue with him. I just kept filling his glass with Scotch and we talked about breeding Herefords. I'm going down to his ranch someday and sell him a bull."

▸ "I've been with Nixon socially; I've traveled with him in his private plane; I've seen him under many conditions. The shallowness of the man overwhelms me; the fact that he is President frightens me."

▸ "Spiro Agnew is appealing to the most base of elements. All the networks broke their asses putting his famous Des Moines speech on television. We almost created him, for God's sake. . . . I resent being lumped in with his Eastern Establishment effete intellectuals. I've had more cow manure on my boots than he ever thought about."

But perhaps the books will have to wait a while. There are streams to fish and mountains to scale and two grandchildren to take with him, instructing them on the wonders and secrets of the still—miraculously—private American West. "It's time to resume living."

On his last night on the program, everything has been suggested from letting Chet take up the whole program with reminiscences, to playing the entire second movement of Beethoven's Ninth (the show's closing theme). But most likely there will be news as usual and the same ending which has closed some 4,500 programs; this time with but a slight variation:

"Good night, David."

"Goodby, Chet." ■