Cronkite talks to Oriana Fallaci about his politics, his past, and his views on the war, Nixon, Agnew, and censorship.

What does Walter Cronkite really think?

Not even a real interview, Mr. Cronkite. Just a conversation between two journalists: an American one and an Italian one. Now, why do you look so amused?

Well, I was just thinking something that you may not like. When I was a little boy, Auntie Wally, my mother's sister, began to research the family history. Auntie Wally had discovered that in her genealogical research the terrible thing was discovered. The terrible thing was that in the early twenties, the terrible thing was that Auntie Wally's and the terrible thing was that we lived in that terrible thing. We lived in the terrible thing. We got to Auntie Wally's house and from there we went to Auntie Wally's house. Auntie Wally called and I heard my mother say: "Oh, no, no!" And Auntie Wally called and I heard my mother say: "Oh, no, no!" Auntie Wally called and I heard my mother say: "Oh, no, no!"

The terrible thing was that in Auntie Wally's research she discovered that in the early twenties, in Kansas City, there was a very heavy Sicilian population and the problems connected with that. Auntie Wally's research was the terrible thing. Auntie Wally's research was the terrible thing. Auntie Wally's research was the terrible thing.

My mother's sister began to research the family history and of course you must imagine the emotion. Auntie Wally was a little boy. Auntie Wally was a little boy. Auntie Wally was a little boy. Auntie Wally was a little boy. Auntie Wally was a little boy. Auntie Wally was a little boy.
course, you must imagine the environment of this—Kansas City in the early twenties, with a very heavy Sicilian population and the problems connected with that. I think we've all grown up a lot since then. One day, Auntie Wally called, and I heard my mother say: "What? Oh, nooooo! Sure, I'll come at once, Wally dear." Her home was a long way from where we lived. Finally we got to Auntie Wally's and the terrible thing she had discovered. The terrible thing was that in her genealogical research, Auntie Wally had discovered that there had been an Italian in the family.

**Beautiful!** You tell that to Auntie Wally. To my mother too. Because, you see, the Cronkites were supposed to be solid German stock, Lutheran background, etc. One side of the family was mostly Dutch with some Scotch, the other side was German.

Was that drop of Italian blood any help? I am afraid it wasn't. I guess my inwardness comes from this. I do not have the gift of openness. I am overcautious to the point that people think of me as kind of remote, and they accuse me of not giving myself, of being too slow at friendship. Which certainly is not intentional. I would like nothing better than being an Irish bar drunk, making friends with everybody. Anyhow, let's begin our conversation. What's the subject?

The one we are already talking about: Walter Cronkite, of course—who he is, what he thinks. Yes, overall, what he thinks. I share this curiosity with God knows how many million people. Each time I listen to you, I wonder: What are his opinions? He doesn't express them, and he must have them! You bet I do. Very strong opinions. Yet I would never give them with the
It's true that I am cold and controlled, says Cronkite, but when I do lose control, I become pretty awful and irrational. It's true that I am...
Communists call me reactionary ...

But this means that you are objective!
The point is that the public doesn't understand objectivity, they judge us on the facts that we give them. Besides, your journalism is different from mine, you explain facts more than give news, and you are not as cautious as I am. You can afford the luxury of being emotional.

Yes. No solid German stock, all furious Florentine stock. Yet I admire your detachment so passionately.

Only a couple of times, if I am not wrong, you have shown emotion on TV. When John Kennedy died and when the first man landed on the moon. Uhm ... "Go, baby, go!" I yelled so. The moon excited me a lot.

But there are other examples. At the Democratic Convention in Chicago, for instance, I got very angry. We had such a bunch there on the Convention floor. And certainly when I found out that Kennedy was dead, that I had to say it, I choked up quite a bit. God, it was hard! You know, Oriana, I never go on the air in shirt-sleeves or with my hair uncombed.

That day, Charles Collingwood relieved me, and when I got up after four hours and a half, I saw my jacket hanging over the back of my chair. So I realized that I was in shirt-sleeves and that I had not even combed my hair. But something else happened.

When I went to my office to call my wife, both my lines were busy because the switchboard was jammed with calls. Then my phone rang, I grabbed it and the voice of a woman came on: "May I have the News Department of CBS?" So I said, "This is the News Department of CBS." And she said, "Well, I want to say that it is absolutely criminal for CBS to have that man Cronkite on the air at a time like this, when everybody knows that he hates the Kennedys."

But there he is, in shirt-sleeves, crying his crocodile tears." I said: "Madam, what's your name?" She gave me her name... let's say it was Mrs. Smith. And I said: "Mrs. Smith, you are speaking to Walter Cronkite and you are a goddamn idiot."

Beautiful. That sounds almost Florentine. Yes, for a Dutch-German-Scot like me! Because it's true that I am cold and controlled, but when I do lose control, I become pretty awful and irrational. Even slow in forgiving, though I suffer for that. Unfortunately, that Park Avenue lady drove me mad.

It was the first voice I heard after four and a half hours of agony on the air, you see. I mean, I am not proud to have invoked the Lord's name in losing my temper but...

Are you a religious man? I think I'm a pretty good Episcopalian. Though I may be somewhat of a rationalist, I do resort to private prayer now and then, in times of extreme stress. It does not happen very often, true; but when it happens, it makes me wonder about myself, and I feel guilty in the sense that I say to myself: Are you a kind of hypocrite or what?

Just human, Mr. Cronkite, and it happens to many of us. But let's go back to your emotions. If you can get emotional about the Chicago Convention and the Park Avenue lady, what's wrong with getting emotional about things like Spiro Agnew and Vietnam? Well, here we go back to the thing called objectivity. So let me go further. Maybe it is impossible to be 100 percent objective, because of emotions, but I don't share the philosophy that it is good to resort to personal opinion because we cannot be 100 percent objective. For me, it is an effort to subjugate my emotions, but it is no effort to be objective. It has never been in 38 years of journalism. I
One has heard in Cambodia...
have always liked to work in the vineyards of purely objective journalism. I come from press-service reporting, you know. I was at United Press for a long period of my life. I used to say that I was the only newsman who enjoyed wire filing. I adored that job. I still do. I think it's fine to put the stuff together and to send it to the client newspapers. It is one of the most honored choices in journalism.

I agree. They do the hardest part of the job. They are the real journalists. But I would like to insist on those two subjects, Spiro Agnew and Vietnam. Shall we, Mr. Cronkite? Vietnam. You know I have changed a lot on that subject. Let's say that the original commitment was a mistake and that we should not have gone to Vietnam originally. But in 1965, when I first went there, I had the impression that we were doing the right thing under such a commitment. I mean I really thought that we intended to limit the war, that we were there to help a nation build peace. And I believed the Washington version about the number of troops that were to be sent. Then, as soon as I got back to the States, the first announcement of a larger troop commitment came. And so many extra troops were sent, though nobody would mention why. Too many things were going on in Washington that were not told to the American people, things for which the Administration was completely discredited. Then the bombings of North Vietnam came, and I did not agree on that either, and I began to believe, as I believe today, that the Americans were responsible for escalation. When I went back to Vietnam, soon after the beginning of the Tet offensive, I found the same old story from the military. That it was a great victory, that we were doing all right, that the destruction caused by us was not so bad. . . . The people on the ground, I mean, were discredited as well.

Do you like the man? You know, I am ambivalent about that. In personal conversations, I like him very much. So I find it difficult to put this together with some of his actions. But let me explain what puzzles me about this point. During 38 years of work as a journalist, I have found very few public figures whom I have disliked on a personal basis. Those who succeed as leaders always have a personal charisma. Nixon does too. Nixon's great difficulty is that he does not come over in public as he does in private. I like him very much. So I find it difficult to put this together with some of his actions. But let me explain what puzzles me about this point. During 38 years of work as a journalist, I have found very few public figures whom I have disliked on a personal basis. Those who succeed as leaders always have a personal charisma. Nixon does too. Nixon's great difficulty is that he does not come over in public as he does in private. I first met Eisenhower during the Second World War when I was a correspondent, and to tell the truth, I did not have tremendous admiration or respect for him. Either as a general or as a President. Then I went to interview him, years later, and I became a sort of Eisenhower buff. In his intellectual capacities, he was a far brighter man—far more reasoning man.
people in the United States say: I don't know what there is in Richard Nixon, but I just don't like him. What do you think it is that causes people not to like him?'' ''Mr. Cronkite, I think it is three things,'' he said in his typical fashion. And he started with his physical characteristics. ''You see, Mr. Cronkite, I have a very heavy beard and a low hairline which gives me a kind of a dark villain appearance. I try to shave three times a day. I try to do what I can, but there is not really much that I can do about that.''

Then he went on with political things, and for half an hour he was quite good. So nice and candid. I really found most admirable qualities in him.

Once you get close to a person, you always find a motivation for indulgence or sympathy. I have felt the same as you when I have interviewed famous men or powerful men. But what counts in them is what they do publicly, not how they look in private. So, each time I risked being seduced, I stopped myself by thinking: You are very cute, dear sir, but you don't fool me. Can I . . . Can we . . . say these things? Or do we go to jail? No jail. Not in America, I hope. The freedom of thought and talk still is one of our strengths, I hope. And I hope that it does not disappear from our daily life, though I sometimes fear that it is. Because this is what Spiro Agnew would like to believe, that we cannot speak against the Government and its policy.

Here we are where I wanted to be. Because you see, Mr. Cronkite, I was born in Fascist Italy, when we could not speak or write or even think. My people fought for this until we won, and so we could think and speak and write. You instead were born in a country that permitted those freedoms, and I have something serious

I wonder if this has already had psychological consequences. Have you censored yourself? On the contrary. We are on guard against such a danger, and it is even possible that the Vice President's threats have had a

Agnew has found a role, says Cronkite. It's intended to play with the worst fears of the people in order to gain political advantage."

And I would definitely act that way because there is no doubt in my mind that being a journalist under wraps is unacceptable. I guess it is a little un-
than he ever appeared in public. He was so brilliant, more brilliant than many brilliant men I have met. To get back to Nixon, before he became President, my feelings were inclined to the favorable side. How? Why? Well, it is difficult to explain, but I have always found a kind of a personality about him that makes me inclined to be sympathetic. I have felt the same as you when I have interviewed him. Do you think that you might experience what we Italians experienced under Fascism? Or in other words, do you think that the government could be as it was under Fascism? I wonder if this has already happened. I have seen that the President's threats have been met with power and they have been met with power and they have been met with power and they...
How did you judge the statement of Nixon on the killing of the students at Kent State University?

I believe that Nixon's statement was a perfunctory statement.
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parents, teachers, ministers? I think that when you put the alternative, they suddenly awake to the fact that there is not an easy solution as the demagogues would suggest.

Now tell me, Mr. Cronkite, do you know Spiro Agnew? What do you Maryland, whether it was purely strategic or whether he deeply believed in them. Certainly, he was deceived by Nelson Rockefeller. When Rockefeller said [in 1968] that he was not a candidate, Agnew was seriously embarrassed because he had been supporting Rockefeller so faithfully. Now, the one who did the most, but I felt somehow close to him. He had more informality, more levity, more humor than the others. The others were terribly serious, including Johnson. To get informality with Johnson, I had to see him after his Presidency. He was a lot calmer then. He had adjusted rather quickly to the pace of the ranch, and I found he had no sense of driving ambition to do anything else than be on his ranch. I enjoyed those days talking with him, under the big old trees, on the lawn, with the reminiscences of the political battles. I love inside political talk, and he is full of that. He has a real fixation on the Vietnam war. Besides, I have always found him a pleasant man to be around. Oh, God! Here I go again!

Does he still believe in the Vietnam war? Oh yes, very much so. He believes he was right. He fails to understand the credibility gap. Usually, in men of his nature, retrospect brings candor, and they admit that not every step they took was right, though they did the best they could, etc. With Johnson, it's none of that. He finds others to blame for the failures, not himself. It surprised me very much.

So, you would prefer Johnson to Nixon? I don't know Nixon too well, but I think that Johnson is more human, more sensitive. Nixon... how do we judge men's sincerity? Nixon is a lawyer, an analyst. Johnson is more visceral, and I think that Johnson deserves a great deal of credit for his Great Society program. He truly feels and thinks for the underprivileged more than Nixon does. I mean Nixon thinks whether it's good or bad for the economic well-being of the country. Johnson instead thinks that this or that has to be done and period. In older generation. In a certain way, I even share their impatience. In a world that has the power of self-destruction, impatience is legitimate.

Of course, this doesn't prevent me from having some very strong arguments with my daughters, whom I admire, let me say. The older tried farming in Hawaii with her husband and now is back in school in Vermont. The other one is married to a young man who works with church groups taking care of underprivileged children and is a social worker herself. They are taking their own position on the world problems of today and sometimes we discuss it. Sometimes I get upset at the kids because I realize that there is excess on both sides. There is no justification for police brutality, but let's take the Black Panthers. A society based on law and justice cannot let them, or anyone else, go running dynamite factories.

Weren't you angry when you were young? Didn't you become violent when wrong was deep? Yes, I was angry. I was fairly radical, though being a radical then was a calm precursor of what we have today. I studied Communism and found it intriguing. Socialism, especially, seemed to me, in those younger days, an answer in many ways. I accepted it not as a practical solution but as an active philosophy. But you see, when my generation was young, it was able to focus its anger. We focused it politically because of Hitler and Mussolini, which probably caused a great delay in the social revolution of this country. I mean we were so upset about what was happening in Europe that we did not see what was happening in America, and our anger did not take as much of a social-conscience direction as it does today.
CRONKITE CONTINUED

I hate to ask you something that, perhaps, I wouldn't be able to answer myself. Yet could you define yourself politically? Today, I mean:

Yes. I can answer that. I think of myself as a true liberal. And, in my mind, a true liberal is someone who is not bound by party. They're liberal in what they believe and deeds, and accepting of other views.

No, you sound good. So good that you'll never be in politics, I guess.

Well, I could see myself in politics. I think it would be marvelous to be in the United States Senate. I would like it. But I wouldn't like to go through what you have to go through in order to get there.

And what else would you like to be if you were not a journalist?

Late in my life, I came to realize that I would have liked to be a test engineer, an astronaut. Because I enjoy working with new things, new challenges, new problems.

Cronkite would like to be in the Senate. "But I wouldn't like to go through what you have to go through in order to get there."

I have learned through it. Much more than I did at the university. In fact, when I left it...

Why did you leave the university?

For the same reasons that kids leave it today, I guess. Dissatisfaction. And to find what I was searching. Which I found in journalism. Would you believe it?

You bet I do. I did exactly the same thing. But tell me, did you ever want or dream of becoming as famous as you are now?

Oh, no! I never had any ambition to be something. I always had the ambition to do something. And I always admired someone else. Even today, I...

If you're a journalist, you have to be a little bit of a coward if you go there without being obliged by a draft card and a general?

True. And the soldiers know it. When they ask: "Why are you here? Do you have to be here?" it's a great compliment to us. Besides, it is not a bad inscription for a grave-stone, is it? "Do you have to be there?"

Or "Did you have to be there?" It could go for all our colleagues who have died in Vietnam and in Cambodia. "Did you have to be there?" Yes, we did, to inform people. The Left, the Right, the silent majority, and even Mr. Agnew.

God, it's so true. I remember when...

I got more nervous then than I was in the war. Did you?

Strangely not.

Apart from that, when the rocket...

Toward the moon, do you feel today as you felt before?

No. I wouldn't go as slowly, with more regard to the financial side of it. I don't mean we have to quit it. On the contrary. We have to find new ways to support the doing of it. But I never believed that the moon should have a top priority. It would be mad. Don't you think so?

Now I do. Before, I was very much interested in the moon. It was a sort of a project. It was a project that I had high hopes for. But now I don't believe in the moon. It's a project that has been...
You bet I do. I did exactly the same thing. But tell me, did you ever want or dream of becoming as famous as you are now? Oh, no! I never had any ambition to be something. I always had the ambition to do something. And I always admired someone else. Even today, I have many doubts about my abilities, and this causes self-doubt about whether I have the educational background and the intellectual capacities. You know, when I get invitations to speak at societies, I always wonder if I have anything to offer, and sometimes I suspect a diabolical plot to make me show that I do not know things. People expect so much from us journalists. They don’t realize that we are only journalists, that the only topic we really know is our time. I am a qualified critic of our time. But to go back to fame, I never looked for success but for a particular thing to do in a particular moment. After studying politics and economics at the university, as well as journalism, I simply wanted to become a reporter. And then a foreign correspondent and then a war correspondent. This, just to be there: not to demonstrate something to myself or to the others. In fact, I am not brave. And I’ll tell you something: I was a great coward in the Second World War. Always looking for a good story in the artillery bases so I wouldn’t have to go out with the infantry, always worrying about the risk of losing an arm or a leg so I couldn’t dance any more. I didn’t have that fear in Vietnam. Maybe because of age.

And who is not scared in war? I always am. When I get where they shoot...