Intelligent TV, R.I.P.

A Veteran Newscaster, and Cronkite Rival, Remembers a Time When Television News Mattered

By Edward Kosner
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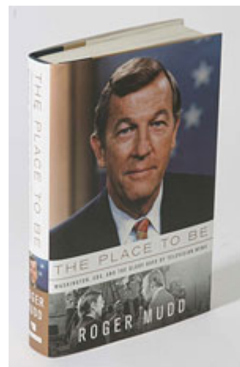
The Place to Be
By Roger Mudd
Public Affairs, 413 pages, $27.95



In a metaphorical Museum of Broadcasting, Roger Mudd would be a dinosaur -- a proud relic of the golden age of television news. Mr. Mudd was a savvy, laconic presence onscreen from his CBS network debut in 1961 until he faded out as anchorman of, appropriately enough, the History Channel in 2004. But for all his accomplishment, he somehow lacked the wattage of the iconic Walter Cronkite and the slightly demented fervor of his rival, Dan Rather, and never got to the very top.

Now Mr. Mudd has written a memoir in the guise of a celebration of the old CBS News Washington bureau. His colleagues were a post-Murrow Murderers' Row, including Eric Severeid, Dan Schorr, Marvin Kalb, the ambitious Rather, Harry Reasoner and Bob Schieffer. CBS lavished generous airtime on them for important stories. "The Place to Be" is a cautionary tale about Mr. Mudd's own honorable career and by implication about the way network TV news has devolved into today's mix of frantic cable blather and the slick superficiality of the Gibson-Williams-Couric evening capsules.

THE PLACE TO BE
Read an excerpt from Roger Mudd's new book.

Born inside the Beltway and steeped in its folkways, Mr. Mudd thought he was Mr. Cronkite's rightful heir, but he was too much the conflicted purist. The CBS suits bizarrely decided to dump Mr. Cronkite as the anchor of the 1964 Democratic convention in Atlantic City and chose a tandem of the rookie Mr. Mudd and Bob Trout, a courtly radio hand who parted his hair down the middle. After first balking at the plum assignment, because he'd rented a beach house for the month with his family, Mr. Mudd relented. The improbable Mudd-Trout team bombed while a smiling Walter sat in a rolling chair outside the convention in Atlantic City and had himself pushed along the boardwalk like a pasha. Mr. Cronkite was soon back in the anchor seat, and Mr. Mudd had a powerful enemy.

Next, Mr. Mudd publicly unburdened himself of a scalding critique of TV news -- addicted to "razzle-dazzle," he said -- that got him banned as Mr. Cronkite's substitute for 2½ years. He got so chummy with Robert and Ethel Kennedy that people thought of him as part of the Kennedy circle. Through the 1970s, he worked as a reporter and weekend anchor. When, in 1981, the moment came to choose Mr. Cronkite's successor, the CBS brass chose the aggressive Dan Rather. Mr. Mudd got the word when a CBS exec dropped into the Washington bureau; his colleagues watched the road kill. Humiliated, Mr. Mudd walked out of the office and didn't return for 26 years (and then only to research his memoir). He headed off to NBC and, for a time, PBS, before ending up at the History Channel.

As Mr. Mudd narrates the glories of TV news in the 1960s and '70s, it is startling to learn that in 1964 Fred Friendly assigned him to provide *daily* coverage of the Senate debate on Lyndon Johnson's civil-rights bill, not only on Cronkite's "CBS Evening News" but also on the network's four other daily newscasts and on four of the seven hourly radio news spots. This despite the fact that for months the debate essentially consisted of a filibuster by Southern windbags like Strom Thurmond and Spessard Holland. By the time the Senate passed the bill, Mr. Mudd's assignment had lasted 12 weeks. Five years later, CBS cleared a full hour of prime time for a Mudd special on the death of GOP leader Everett Dirksen, the Senate's mellifluous wizard of ooze. Were these the judgments of enlightened news executives or the indulgent choices of network mandarins whose audience -- unlike today's remote-control jockeys -- had nowhere else to go?

Mr. Mudd's tale is a reminder of how technology has inexorably determined the scope and nature of TV news. The introduction of easy-to-shoot-and-edit videotape in the late 1950s replaced movie film for most stories, and the 1962 launch of the Telstar communications satellite enabled the networks to transmit their tape or live coverage from wherever the news was happening. This, Mr. Mudd writes, shattered the newspapers' monopoly on breaking news and led to the expansion of Mr. Cronkite's "CBS Evening News" to 30 minutes on Sept. 3, 1963 -- barely three months before the assassination of John F. Kennedy triggered the news explosion of the 1960s. In our era, another tech-driven phenomenon, cable news, has allowed the networks to shrink their coverage into the half-hour evening-news ghetto each night and weekly newsmagazine shows like "60 Minutes."

More storyteller than media theorist, Mr. Mudd paces his memoir with engaging quick takes. Aboard Air Force One during the Kennedy administration, he passes through the president's private quarters and glimpses a set of shelves bursting with dozens of freshly laundered shirts -- JFK's version of Gatsby's wall of shirts, which so dazzled Daisy Buchanan. Before interviewing Robert Kennedy for a TV special, Mr. Mudd asks him whether he would prefer to be addressed as "Mr. Attorney General" or "Attorney General Kennedy." "How about Bobbsie?" replies RFK.

CBS/Landov

Roger Mudd interviews Ted Kennedy in WSJ.com 1979. A presidential bid soon ended.

Crooked Spiro Agnew confides that he keep his suit creases crisp by never crossing his legs while sitting down and never leaning against a chair back. Sharing a dais with Richard Nixon at a TV correspondents' banquet, Mr. Mudd and the president watch Diana Ross perform. "They really do have a sense of rhythm, don't they!" marvels Nixon. On the night Nixon resigned, Lillian Brown, a CBS makeup artist, was summoned to the White House and had to comfort the sobbing president so that his makeup would stop running. Later, when she worked on Ronald Reagan, she found each time that he was *already* wearing makeup.

Mr. Mudd's signature moment, of course, was his 1979 interview with Sen. Edward Kennedy, who was poised to challenge President Jimmy Carter for the Democratic nomination. A simple question from Mr. Mudd -- "Why do you want to be president?" -- prompted a nearly incoherent 334-word monologue from Sen. Kennedy that showed plainly that he didn't know why he wanted to be president, dooming his White House hopes forever.

The episode makes Mr. Mudd's larger point: The interview was the culmination of months of work by a correspondent known and trusted by the Kennedys on a definitive prime-time hour devoted to Teddy's candidacy. CBS News invested its resources, used top talent and heavily promoted the program. The payoff was a memorable and valuable moment in American political history -- and great television. It's hard to imagine the same effort being made three decades later by a network news division, or by a cable news network for that matter. CBS News -- and TV news today -- could benefit from a little old-school Mudd in its eye.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News. His memoir, "It's News to Me," has recently been reissued in paperback.

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