

Oral History

Interview with Hodding Carter III

By Courtney Brennan:

(Editor's note: Unfortunately, technology failed and much of this important tape was inaudible)

BRENNAN: inaudible

CARTER: My strongest memory is that growing sense that we had to be as directly involved in it as we could possibly be, that this was a critical moment in our history. And as Southerners, we were given an absolute gift, which was to be right there in the middle of the field at a moment of crisis in American history. That was dramatic. It happened to be the way we felt, both the reporters and those of us who were managers then. I have to tell you, the opportunity was one that you could not always measure up to. It was always right in front of you, and you had a responsibility, you had the opportunity, and you had to keep making a run at it.

BRENNAN: inaudible

CARTER: I have had the great fortune, not always fortune, sometimes something more painful than that, of growing up in my father's house. I had seen a man who I knew to be (*sounds like "frightened"*), I knew hated the pressures, I knew felt besieged, nonetheless, tighten up his belt, and go out, and do what he thought was necessary. And I learned what courage was. It wasn't being a guy who's never afraid. Courage was being afraid and just saying, "Okay, you've got to go do it." I didn't always go do it. But it was also knowing that if you missed it one day or it missed it one week, then you had to get back up and go try it again. You know, I didn't spend my life coming along thinking that I was going to be out there fighting all the time, even though I was living in my father's house. But because I lived in my father's house, and because I followed in his footsteps, I knew that you could, that you could overcome it.

BRENNAN: At what point (inaudible)

CARTER: I think that journalism is an absolutely wonderful profession, craft, trade to be in if you want to help people. You just happen to be in one in which the way you're helping them, is giving them the tools to take action on behalf of their democracy, on behalf of the social circumstances, on behalf of whatever it is that you're providing and opinion about. That is a major undertaking. It is not sculpting a way to protect that this is my contribution. I do not think, on the other hand, of course, that it's some violation of an eternal covenant if you decide that what I need to do is to go out there and be a participant. You have given tools to other journalists to carry forward, and protection by coverage and everything else, to go forward as actor. And I have never been ashamed of having quit being a quote "honest journalist" and becoming an actor. I felt in many ways it helped me immensely in better understanding the kinds of things that my paper

was trying to cover and trying to deal with. There are a million arguments against doing what I did, and they're not invalid. I just don't think that they are necessarily valid. I mean, we make our choices. I would say to you and anybody else, I could have been an extremely well-fulfilled person if I'd stayed just in straight journalism, except that I felt I'm so subjective that eventually I just thought, "Man, I have got to go out. I, I mean, I, I, I (**not stuttering, just emphasizing his need**) have got to go do something." So, I did get involved.

BRENNAN: inaudible

CARTER: I think that there are a couple of things here, which are true, and they're all true simultaneously, which may be confusing. The first thing is that it was a vast and larger quantity of what amounts to personality journalism than there ever was. That being said, there was a world of personality journalism in the good old days – people who were famous for being famous in the business or because they were really good at being celebrities. A famous name in the business was a celebrity – a couple of the great old names were celebrities. Some of them actually thought nothing of being taken in through the back door in (inaudible) company during the rule of General Clark and (inaudible), but they did.

But the members in the business were largely limited. We now have television, we have cable, we have the net, we have a variety of possibilities on the electronic side. We have radio, we have magazines, we have newspapers, we have a variety of everything. There are a lot more people that have been famous at some point in the game, but having celebrity anchors flaw, viewers are highly skeptic, and that's the reality of it.

But there's plenty of (inaudible) in this 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week thing called the news business, from whatever approach you want to take. We have more niche magazines – there is just so much of it out there. (inaudible sentence) But I'll tell you, there was never a golden age in the sense of some long period. I honestly do believe there was a period that kind of arose after World War II and ran until about 25 years ago, to which there was a level of commitment to a certain kind of professional approach that was unique in American journalistic history. And it was a golden age of that kind of journalism that happened, in large part, because the level of competition was so much lower, which had left the day when there were 14 newspapers in New York City. When we were down to a couple in New York, people could be more laid back. (inaudible sentence) But the consolidation of newspapers was a critical point.

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