Libel Defense Resource Center

Transcription of Panel Discussion with Bradlee - Hewitt - Isaacson - and Sawyer
ROBIN BIERSTEDT: Good evening.

I am Robin Bierstedt of Time Inc., and it is my privilege to be here tonight as the chair of the Libel Defense Resource Center, an organization devoted to the promotion and defense of the First Amendment.

I have always thought that defending journalists was one of the worthwhile things a lawyer could do. Well it is now clearly more worthwhile than ever. Since September 11th the role of the press has become more vital than ever, providing not just information and analysis, and understanding, but also connection, and comfort. Of course there are new challenges as well. The First Amendment, which is unique to this country, is of course a reflection of this country’s great strength. But as we know, the history lesson of the last century is that principles of free speech and a free
press suffer in times of crisis, when the country feels vulnerable. A few weeks ago the spokesperson of the Bush Administration, Ari Fleisher, told people to “watch what you say.” That comment was then deleted from the official transcript. And who said irony was dead?

Well to talk about the press in these extraordinary times we have assembled a four-star panel -- with four stars.

One of our guests tonight has headed not one, but two major news organizations. Two of the panelists have each been portrayed in a major motion picture [Laughter] -- one favorably.

WALTER ISAACSON: Hum. [Laughter] It was Jason Robards. It was not a major picture, was it?

ROBIN BIERSTEDT: And the final participant has made the cover of Time magazine. It doesn’t get much bigger than
Don Hewitt is the creator and executive producer of 60 MINUTES, the longest running primetime show in television history. The program has generated a slew of awards and libel suits, as well as the [Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: It kept a whole room fully employed.

BEN BRADLEE: It kept them at work.

DON HEWITT: Yeah.

ROBIN BIERSTEDT: Yeah, as well as a controversy that famously did not result in litigation, although it did become a movie, about tobacco whistleblower Jeffrey Wigand. Mr. Hewitt also produced and directed the 1960 presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon, which was a first for both television and politics.

Now, since Nixon was the winner
on radio, while JFK had the clear advantage on TV, I guess you could say that Don Hewitt caused Nixon to lose the election. Don, where were you in '68 and '72?

Ben Bradlee is the former executive editor of the Washington Post. He stood up to the government by publishing the Pentagon Papers and brought a president down with his paper’s Watergate coverage. Jason Robards played him in the movie and almost did justice to his earthy, swashbuckling style. In the annals of libel, he successfully [Laughter] fought the Tavoulareas case and with it won new protections for the press. He also fought the Justice Department when they tried to subpoena unpublished photographs, leading to the DOJ guidelines that are -- usually -- followed when members of the press are subpoenaed. His autobiography is modestly called A Good
Diane Sawyer is co-anchor of both PrimeTime Thursday and Good Morning America on ABC. She worked in the administration of Richard Nixon, and helped him write his memoirs when he became, thanks to Ben Bradlee, the former president. [Laughter]

BEN BRADLEE: [Off Mike]

ROBIN BIERSTEDT: She’s clearly a journalist for our times, since she’s had remarkable access to the world’s bad guys, having interviewed, among others, Fidel Castro, Saddam Hussein, and even Sammy “The Bull” Gravano. Her undercover investigation of the Food Lion grocery chain led to a celebrated lawsuit that put newsgathering methods on trial. In 1989, Time magazine put her on the cover with the cover line “Is she worth it?” Clearly the answer was, and is, yes

WALTER ISAACSON: [Off Mike]
Robin Bierstedt: Walter Isaacson is chairman and CEO of CNN, a position he took just four months ago after five years as managing editor of Time and a brief stint as editorial director of Time Inc. He brought Time magazine from doldrums to glory, and took to CNN the lesson that a news organization can prosper even in the absence of hard news. [Laughter]

Yeah, I guess that’s a lesson that can wait for now. Walter is too young to have either helped or hurt the career of Richard Nixon [Laughter], but he did write a book about Nixon’s fellow wiretapper Henry Kissinger. It took some time but Kissinger is now speaking to Walter again.

Walter, it’s all yours.

Walter Isaacson: Well, thanks, the big difference, I think

[Applause]...Thank you very much Robin.
[Applause]

Robin is one of the many lawyers who kept us out of trouble but the main one who kept us out of trouble at Time magazine. Thanks. Except for Tailwind, where were you? [Off Mike]

ROBIN Bierstedt: That was CNN

WALTER ISAACSON: Oh yeah. The main difference, I think, between lawyers, especially lawyers like you that often have to go to trial, and journalists, is that lawyers are always prepared. They are sort of the David Boies, they have stayed up all night and read. And journalists, we kind of wing it

BEN BRADLEY: Like now

WALTER ISAACSON: Like now. That’s right, we were sitting at that table there saying we ought to prepare for what we are going to do. And Ben is ordering extra bottles of wine, and telling us about his first sexual
escapade, and making his kid read about it in his memoirs. [Laughter]

So my first question is Ben

BEN BRADLEE: Is that?

WALTER ISAACSON: What was your first, no [Laughter]

BEN BRADLEE: That’s so unfair

WALTER ISAACSON: No, is [Laughter] so one of the things we decided to do is that we are going to open this up to questions [Laughter]

[Interposing]

BEN BRADLEE: not this early.

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, not yet, but just think of questions. And it is true to look at a panel that, to be serious for a moment, when you talk about investigative journalism has helped define, over many decades, if I may say, what investigative journalism is about. Both in terms of inventing 60 MINUTES, and what Diane has done in personalizing the
notion of investigative journalism, and
what Ben did in changing the whole nature
of journalism in the period of Watergate,
and the Pentagon Papers, and everything
else. So if there is a tradition of
investigative journalism in this country,
it is due to the three of you all, and
also it ties in with what you are doing in
this room. I did look back in the bios
and they do made you feel like old
geezers, I tried to figure out what you
all were doing in the year I was born.
[Laughter] Don Hewitt covered, produced,
and directed the coverage of the
coronation of Queen Elizabeth that year

DON HEWITT: The year you were
born?

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah.

DON HEWITT: That can’t be true!

[Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Like Diane, I
lie about my age. And
BEN BRADLEE: That is just not true!

[Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, and you had joined Newsweek having finally had your first, never mind, [Laughter] in Paris, in that year. And Diane, I did not do that to you because probably you were not even born.

[Interposing]

But let me start with you Ben, having set you up as an old geezer.

BEN BRADLEE: Yeah

WALTER ISAACSON: Compare the situation in our war time now, if this is truly a war time, and the war time you first covered and the constraints on the flow of information, and on our ability to speak freely without having to worry about the government, patriotism patrols, and everything else.

BEN BRADLEE: Well, the first war
I covered I was in. I did not cover it, I was in it I mean. I was looking out for my number one. But the difference was that if you compare December 7th to September 11th, immediately everybody of my age, which was twenty, knew what he was going to do, where he was going to go, there was I was in the ROTC at Harvard, I knew exactly when I was going to graduate, and on what ship I was going on, and I knew where the ship was being built, I knew where it was going, and I knew who the enemy was. And I think that that made life so much simpler.

WALTER ISAACSON: But do you worry about the free flow of information now?

BEN BRADLEE: Did I then?

WALTER ISAACSON: No, no, now.

BEN BRADLEE: I didn’t worry one Goddamn bit about it.

WALTER ISAACSON: No, now, in
this war. [Laughter]

BEN BRADLEE: No reporters ever went to cover destroyers in the Pacific. I am less worried about the obstacles confronting the press now than may be some of you. I mean, I don’t think of civil liberties, the violation of civil liberties -- I worry about it, but it is down there on the list with other things that I worry about, quite far down.

[Interposing] I heard a gasp, I understand, I heard a gasp, and I am sure that when the history of the world is written, that issue is not going to get it for this period of time in history.

WALTER ISAACSON: Would you put up with the constraints that they are asking now when you were editing the Washington Post? Or would you have defied it?

BEN BRADLEE: I don’t know of the restraints that the Post faces, I mean the
restraints that we face.

WALTER ISAACSON: There are lots of things the Post has not printed in the past three, four weeks, and they admit it and they brag about it. Would you have been that way?

BEN BRADLEE: Well there are lots of things that the Post did not print in what you describe as the, you know, the finest hours.

WALTER ISAACSON: The “Golden Bradlee age”?

BEN BRADLEE: No, I didn’t use that word. But, of course, you don’t print things. In the last analysis, some of them are not very important. I suppose if out of these thousand prisoners who have been arrested as a result of this, if one of them was my brother I would be pissed. [Laughter] But he is not.

WALTER ISAACSON: Hey Diane,

[Laughter] ABC
DON HEWITT: Here, here, I’m with you [Applause]

WALTER ISAACSON: This is the difference between a lawyer’s version of civil liberties and a journalist’s.

DIANE SAWYER: I thought this was going to be a high-minded, august panel. Is it too late to leave this panel? [Laughter]

BEN BRADLEE: My first job after World War II was with Roger Baldwin in the Civil Liberties Union, so my credentials are old if not perfect. [Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Because of Douglas Edwards, or something? Diane, your network, Peter, David Westin, and all, are getting a little bit hit by what is now being called by the New York Times, the patriotism police. People are trying to monitor. Are you deviating, you know, from being an American, by being too much of a journalist? Does that affect you
DIANE SAWYER: I think it affects everybody to the extent that you do think about what you are saying, and you understand that you are operating in an area of inflamed feelings. There are lots of times that we operate in areas of inflamed feelings, not just now, where you know that the words you say have a, they land with a reverberation beyond sometimes the specific words themselves. So do you think about it? Yes. I don’t think any of this, though, has inhibited anybody from saying anything they felt. I don’t think.

WALTER ISAACSON: Let me tell you the point, well, go ahead.

DIANE SAWYER: Journalism yet, and to come back to what you say, I mean, we too have gotten the call from the Pentagon that says you have special forces information, and don’t run it right now,
at least until they are off the ground. And everybody has said from the beginning, it’s a question of what is being asked, how long it is being asked to be withheld, and whether you think eventually the information is going to reach the public or not.

WALTER ISAACSON: Let me tell you where we have been very restrained and withholding. The Osama Bin Laden tapes

DIANE SAWYER: Yeah, Al Jazeera

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, Al Jazeera stuff, so Condi Rice gets on the phone, David Westin, myself, and two other presidents of news divisions, or three others, and says “Look, you know, don’t, you know, you can do whatever you want, use your editorial judgment”. She bends over backwards to make it clear that she is not making any formal request, we don’t have to agree to anything, but she is saying, “Here are the security concerns,
if you keep running these things, over and over again.” And, you know, maybe they are coded messages, maybe they are propaganda, inflammatory. And we all said, okay, we get it. And, the only thing we agreed to is that we will look at them first, before we run them. And we all make a pretty strong statement especially David, and Andrew Heyward, and we are going to run these things if we really want to. Or, we are going to run large excerpts of them, but we won’t run them live, and we will use some of our judgment. And it gets inflamed a bit that we all got this call and do we do it right away. So Saturday or Sunday, another tape comes in. And you know they never asked us not to use large parts of that tape but somehow all of us used tiny snippets. We never really ran the tape. Nobody in this country has seen any large portion of that tape of Osama Bin Laden. I think we were
not cowed so much by Condi Rice, or the
government, as by this whole notion of the
criticism you could get if you were doing
propaganda.

DIANE SAWYER: But there’s...

WALTER ISAACSON: Go ahead.

DIANE SAWYER: But the operative
question is was there something new in it?
What is news? Was it the same thing we
heard over again? Did you feel you
actually did not run something that was
news?

WALTER ISAACSON: We ran more
than others and we felt it was newsworthy,
he attacked the United Nations, and he
attacked other Arab leaders, etc. No
other organization even ran that, and I
think we scaled back a bit. And I think
everybody else truly scaled back. Don?

DON HEWITT: I had no problem
with Condi Rice asking that of the
networks. Newspapers take copy from
reporters and they edit it, and they think about it, and they decide what to do with it, and we don’t. Up to the time that Condi Rice made that request of us, we would just put it on the air. Nobody sat and looked at it, nobody knew what the hell we were putting on. It was Osama Bin Laden, so give him his say.

[Interposing]

WALTER ISAACSON: Osama Bin Laden [Interposing] tape which made some news, I thought, not one syllable of his voice or one sentence of his quote ran on CBS. Would you have run some of it? Or did you think it was...

DON HEWITT: no

WALTER ISAACSON: Or do you not even know what it says because you never ran it?

DON HEWITT: No, first of all I don’t know what he said, but I think I would have sat and looked at it and said...
that’s worth running, that’s baloney, that’s interesting. And you’d look at it the way you’d look at any other story. But we were not, we were just opening up the flood gates and saying hey...

WALTER ISAACSON: But do you think we have gone to the other extreme now?

DON HEWITT: I haven’t, I don’t know what, I don’t watch. I watch Jeopardy so I don’t know what...

[Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Diane

DIANE SAWYER: I don’t believe it, I am sitting between two guys who are talking about their sexual experiences,

DON HEWITT: No, I’m not talking about sexual experience, he is.

DIANE SAWYER: I don’t believe this.

WALTER ISAACSON: We could change the nature of this panel.
DIANE SAWYER: That’s right.

DON HEWITT: But what is it that?

DIANE SAWYER: But let me ask you Walter, the whole, as we know much discussed, this memo that went out, ostensibly from you, in which to turn it around, instead of things being withheld, things were supposed to be inserted into broadcast; about the fire still burning, the 5,000 dead, when you report about casualties in Afghanistan, that you are to report about the fact that they could be using human shields. Once you start imposing those kinds of hit the key on the typewriter and keep those phrases in, aren’t you risking a different kind of balancing act?

WALTER ISAACSON: It is one of the risks of being on a panel with Diane where you are supposed to be the moderator, and all of sudden [Laughter] she gets to ask the questions because she
is so much better at it, but I’ll answer.

I actually strongly felt what happened, what I said, I didn’t, it wasn’t actually a memo that was supposed to go out all over the place, it was an e-mail to the deputy CNN USA person who then sent it around, and then soon it, I forget that e-mail has a life of its own, and that it hits Howie Kurtz’s column within 22 minutes of the time you’ve sent it.

BEN BRADLEE: Poor baby.

WALTER ISAACSON: But I was watching -- I know, I’ll survive --

[Laughter], I was watching the memorial service, you know one month later, this week or so. Well, it was pretty moving. You know these people there, and we had gotten correspondence in the Kandahar and on that trip and we were getting a lot of videos, and I’d say okay, that’s the last of the big memorial services and that is going to fade away. And we just can start
getting daily video tape of people suffering in Afghanistan. And I thought it was important to keep it in perspective, because I thought it protected us so that we could cover what happened in Afghanistan more without being criticized or, you know, being just a propaganda tool. We were going to put it in a balanced perspective, or in context. And frankly I was trying to make sure that people didn’t criticize us too much for covering all the things that were happening in Afghanistan I’d say the best way to do it is to try to put in a context, for the viewer, of the horrible thing that had happened here. I think we are all torn. I’ll pose this as a question as well too. People are saying are you a U.S. citizen, are you American, or are you a journalist?

Those of us who sort of live in New York, I now live in two cities, you
know, we are kind of torn. This really affected us. And I live in a little street, you know, in Yonkers.

BEN BRADLEE: You live in Yonkers?

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah.

BEN BRADLEE: You don’t live in Yonkers. [Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Three fathers on a little cul-de-sac road were killed, three fathers of my daughter’s friends. And so when you go back for Halloween, and they don’t have their dads there, and, you realize, you know, this is not the same type of thing as maybe other wars, and other situations. But Diane go for it.

DIANE SAWYER: No, I was just wondering, would you do it again? Would you send out that memo, you didn’t send out again? [Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Huh, yeah. I mean, first of all
DIANE SAWYER: And is it ongoing?

Are you going...

WALTER ISAACSON: It is ongoing, it’s tricky. If we ever get flooded again with Afghan suffering and start forgetting what caused this whole thing. I guess that’s the only job I have in this world, because I don’t quite know what to do as chairman of CNN, it’s to remind people to keep things in perspective. Ben,

BEN BRADLEE: Well, if

WALTER ISAACSON: and I probably will have to remind them again, because we will get flooded with new videos from Afghanistan and we will probably be covering that more, and we will have to say “Wait a minute, remember what started this damn thing.”

BEN BRADLEE: Well, I would just make a statement that I am not in frontline in any way now, I mean, I’m not in the decision making process, but you
are describing threats from Condoleezza Rice, that does not seem to me to be a threat.

WALTER ISAACSON: It wasn’t a threat, or, it was a request.

BEN BRADLEE: Well, I mean, excuse me, a little pressure, a little don’t please do this.

WALTER ISAACSON: No

BEN BRADLEE: Well don’t do this, or don’t do as we pointed out.

WALTER ISAACSON: No

BEN BRADLEE: I’m telling you, compared to Bill Casey with a couple of martinis in him,

DON HEWITT: that’s right

[Laughter]

BEN BRADLEE: telling you [Laughter] that 18 U.S.C section something or other. We’ll have your ass in jail if you printed that

WALTER ISAACSON: No, no, John
Mitchell’s quote about Ms. Graham

BEN BRADLEE: Ms. Graham, talking about Katharine’s private parts, and [Laughter] I felt, I haven’t heard from you

WALTER ISAACSON: You’re right, you’re looking a much tougher

BEN BRADLEE: No but I mean, and never mind the Pentagon Papers, but they took two papers all the way to the Supreme Court for writing,

WALTER ISAACSON: for publishing those papers

BEN BRADLEE: for accusing them of being a threat to the National Security for something that the Solicitor General 18 years later said did not contain any National Security violation. I mean that is a pressure, never mind having to get the powers that be to write a check for Ed Williams for, you know, a couple of $250, $300,000 for ten days’ work. [Laughter] I
think, no I really think

WALTER ISAACSON: You’re in a room full of people who have pictures of Edward Bennett Williams

BEN BRADLEE: They are all down there too [Laughter], they are all down there. [Laughter] But I mean, I think, I mean Casey was terrible the way he threatened and John Mitchell was terrible, the way he threatened. And you are getting Condoleeza Rice in a beautiful Lord & Taylor costume [Laughter], looking like a million bucks, telling you, just to be, you know, just to be polite.

WALTER ISAACSON: Diane would you agree that our generation has it easier than Ben’s? [Laughter]

BEN BRADLEE: That’s isn’t what I’m saying and you know it.

WALTER ISAACSON: No, I will say this. One of the annoying things, if there was one, about Dr. Rice’s phone
call, is how much she spent saying “I’m not asking you to do anything, I understand the freedom of the press

BEN BRADLEE: Well, why don’t you say whether it was annoying or not?

WALTER ISAACSON: No

BEN BRADLEE: It was annoying

WALTER ISAACSON: No, no, but she did a lot of prefacing, that she wasn’t asking, she wasn’t trying to restrain

[Interposing]

BEN BRADLEE: Bill Casey did not preface, I’ll tell you that [Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: It was. She was very sensitive. I wish I could say it was annoying. She was very sensitive to the editorial judgment we had to make and we felt no pressure at all.

DIANE SAWYER: And do you think she had a point?

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah

DON HEWITT: I do
WALTER ISAACSON: Don,

DON HEWITT: I do because it was going on the air raw, and nobody does that. They were just taking stuff. And you become a propaganda, you become a loudspeaker for him, and that’s not the job we are in, to become a loudspeaker for anybody. We were just giving him a microphone and saying “hey, be our guest, use our air, say what you want to say.” Look at it. Maybe when you get all through looking at it, you’ll say “I’ll run it all,” or maybe “I won’t run any of it,” or “I’ll run half of it.” But you make editorial judgments and that’s why you’re in this business.

DIANE SAWYER: But we take live coverage of things all the time. You are giving a consideration to the fact that we are acting as Americans and not just the way we act by reflex when there’s a car chase on a highway, when we just punch in
there, we take it live, we all stay glued

DON HEWITT: But if you’re going
to equate that with what we are facing in
this country right now, a terror campaign,
and a truck running down a highway,
that’s, there’s a big gap there.

DIANE SAWYER: No, I’m not
equating them, I’m not equating them, I’m
just saying that there is a consideration
being given to the fact that we are
responsible in another dimension, and
don’t just do things by reflex, so...

WALTER ISAACSON: What do you
mean by that Diane?

DIANE SAWYER: Huh?

WALTER ISAACSON: What do you
mean [Interposing], what do you make of
our responsibility?

DIANE SAWYER: Well

BEN BRADLEE: Our responsibility
is a patriotic one as well as journalistic
one?
DIANE SAWYER: We have an extra consideration, and that we recognize it.

DON HEWITT: Good, I think so.

DIANE SAWYER: Yeah

DON HEWITT: Yeah, I think it’s, that’s why I didn’t object when...

BEN BRADLEE: but don’t you have that when you go to work in the morning?

DON HEWITT: Sure

BEN BRADLEE: On a story that’s got nothing to do with...

DON HEWITT: Yeah

BEN BRADLEE: with the Taliban

DIANE SAWYER: Well, no, all I was saying is that when Don says that we were just taking something and putting it out there unedited, there are times that we do that, let me not use a car chase, which is a silly example, but there are times that we do take things and we put them on unedited and we are riding the moment, and CNN certainly,
WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, I mean, most of what we put on is live, so you know, we would, if we had to.

DIANE SAWYER: We’re taking that press conference, you’re taking the press conference everyday from those two guys sitting there.

BEN BRADLEE: Exactly, I mean, you don’t think you are getting snowed by the President of the United States when you go to a press conference?

WALTER ISAACSON: Or live Ari Fleisher’s briefings or...

BEN BRADLEE: And you don’t have to see that in advance to

WALTER ISAACSON: Would you hold off on Ari? Or Rumsfeld’s briefings?

BEN BRADLEE: Yeah, I mean, then, that’s just...

DON HEWITT: Hey, I’m an American, right? And I don’t particularly, I’m not crazy about these
guys,

BEN BRADLEE: Rumsfeld, and those guys?

DON HEWITT: but they are speaking for the only government I’ve got and until I get another one, I don’t know what to do about it. But I don’t have to give the air to Osama Bin Laden. I might, if I looked at it, and I said “hey, that’s kind of interesting, what he said, let’s put in on.”

DIANE SAWYER: Yeah, but what about CNN putting on live everyday the briefing out of Pakistan by the two Talibani. Would you put that on everyday, unedited?

DON HEWITT: I’m not sure I would

DIANE SAWYER: You don’t know what they are going to say

DON HEWITT: I don’t know. It’s actually, I think I’d look at it, put it on a delay, and then say hey, or I’d want
somebody to comment about this, this is
you know, this is baloney

BEN BRADLEE: I don’t think you
want to go there. Well, I mean because
you, you cover live press conferences from
people with the biggest axe to grind in
the country, and don’t worry about it, if
I were you I wouldn’t worry about it
either

WALTER ISAACSON: Well, for
better or worse, about a week ago, I went
the way Don said which is we stopped
covering live Taliban press conferences,
and did it on a delay and picked up
excerpts of it, but you think that we
should just cover it live?

BEN BRADLEE: No, I don’t, but I
mean, I think you’ve got to understand
that you’re, that whenever you cover
anything live, you are running a risk of
being had, and that’s why all those
stories, I think that’s why you have all
those talking heads [Laughter] to kind of maneuver after [Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: [Interposing]
Is it worse in this situation to be had by the American government than it is to be had by the Taliban?

BEN BRADLEE: Say it again

WALTER ISAACSON: Is it worse to be had by the American government than it is to be had by the Taliban, in this environment?

BEN BRADLEE: Publicly, it is. I always was terribly hurt by being hurt by your friends, which happens. Because you have no stake in these other guys, and if they take you once, they won’t take you twice. But if your friends take you once, you are really in trouble. You may have to do it again.

WALTER ISAACSON: So if you had an interview, Don, would you try to get an interview with Osama bin Laden, or
something?

DON HEWITT: Sure, of course

WALTER ISAACSON: But you

wouldn’t make

DON HEWITT: But I would like to edit it, I don’t want to put it on live. I’d like to see it, and hone it, and use the questions that were newsworthy or not newsworthy, but I don’t want to turn our air to him, I don’t want to say you can have the whole hour, say what you want to say

DIANE SAWYER: And so, if he said I’ll only do it live? Which is an odd idea anyway.

DON HEWITT: If he’d only want to do it live, I’d say “I would hope that CBS would find an hour for him but I don’t think where we are is the place to do it”

WALTER ISAACSON: So you wouldn’t do it on 60 MINUTES, but you’d make Andrew do it, right?
DIANE SAWYER: So that’s not where, that’s not where Mike Wallace is tonight, just checking [Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Mike has a better excuse?

DON HEWITT: That’s where he is right this minute. He is in a cave, and with a little luck he won’t come out. [Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: But we could try to turn this back to a libel law question, so we could turn it to the audience. So are there any questions out there? Yes? In the way back

MALE VOICE: Would you, if you had an interview with Osama Bin Laden would you turn him over to the government?

WALTER ISAACSON: If you had an interview with Osama Bin Laden, would you turn him over to the government?

DON HEWITT: No.

BEN BRADLEE: Would you turn him
WALTER ISAACSON: Him over

BEN BRADLEE: You mean grab him by the throat and take him out?

WALTER ISAACSON: I didn’t ask the question

BEN BRADLEE: I don’t know what you mean by “turn him over to the government”

WALTER ISAACSON: Okay let me pose the question.

DIANE SAWYER: Turn him over

WALTER ISAACSON: We’ve been contacted about giving an interview with Osama Bin Laden, etc. Suppose

BEN BRADLEE: Is it hypothetical, or you

DON HEWITT: Yes

WALTER ISAACSON: Semi-

hypothetical

BEN BRADLEE: Semi, yeah okay

DIANE SAWYER: Semi-hypothetical?
[Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: we say, we’re not going to keep secret any information we get, so, you know, and so we’re open both to our viewers and anybody else.

DIANE SAWYER: You mean about where he is?

WALTER ISAACSON: About any relationship to contacts we have, because I would feel uncomfortable having secret information that I couldn’t share with my viewers and frankly, although it’s a trickier situation, couldn’t share with the government, if I felt it would be useful. So I don’t want to, you know, I said, we are going to. But suppose, you had an interview with Osama Bin Laden, would you do something to make it so that the government, so that the U.S. could kill him or capture him? Would you help the government to capture him?

BEN BRADLEE: They would never
come up exactly like that, but would you help the government?

DON HEWITT: That’s hypothetical, it doesn’t really exist

BEN BRADLEE: But that’s a really interesting case

DON HEWITT: These are lawyers. They deal on hypotheticals, don’t they

BEN BRADLEE: but that they deal, that we know

DON HEWITT: you’ve got to know that this case is

WALTER ISAACSON: There is a Latin word for it probably [Laughter]

BEN BRADLEE: Plessy vs. Ferguson, yeah, [Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: That’s Italian.

BEN BRADLEE: But I mean, God, I’m having déjà vu. During Vietnam, if you saw anybody in Paris, if you happened to see some representatives of the North Vietnamese government
DON HEWITT: [Unintelligible]

BEN BRADLEE: Yes, because we all did, what is your obligation to go trotting over to the spooks and tell them that you saw this guy and such, and this is what he said. If you are working for a weekly news magazine, you know, or do you wait for five days, or three days, or four days, or whatever the hell it is. I mean, I don’t think that’s a great issue.

WALTER ISAACSON: In terms of where he is at?

DON HEWITT: Wait a minute, what do you mean Ben? You would, you would go over and tell the spooks?

BEN BRADLEE: No

DON HEWITT: Neither would I

BEN BRADLEE: No, but they told me. It depends on what they’d tell me. They would just, you know, they would so bullshitting you that they would just lay on their propaganda that the CIA
presumably knew about it. If they'd said
to me that the president was coming, and
they'd be at the corner of the Champs
Elysées and something else, and they were
going to knock him off, of course I'd tell
it, in a minute

WALTER ISAACSON: Sure that's all
right. If you knew where Osama was
because you were trying to get an
interview with him, would you tell, would
you call up Condi Rice and say what you're
doing?

DON HEWITT: No

WALTER ISAACSON: You wouldn't?

DON HEWITT: That's not my job

WALTER ISAACSON: What's your
job?

DON HEWITT: I assume, if I know
where he is, and they don't know where he
is, there is something wrong with them.

[Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: Let us
stipulate, as lawyers would say, that they
apparently don’t know where he is.

[Laughter]

DON HEWITT: First of all, I’m
not sure Osama Bin Laden is all that
important to this whole operation anyway.
I think a guy named Ayman al-Zawahiri, in
Egypt, is the mastermind, the guy that
engineered the assassination of Sadat,
probably did the Cole, the Khobar Towers
and the two embassies, and the Trade
Center, and he is the brains of this thing

WALTER ISAACSON: You kind of are
changing the subject

DON HEWITT: And then if you get
Osama Bin Laden, I don’t know what the
hell you get.

WALTER ISAACSON: Diane?

DIANE SAWYER: Huh?

BEN BRADLEE: What’s the
question?

WALTER ISAACSON: If you knew, if
you knew where he was, would you call Condi Rice? If you were trying to get an interview and you found where he was?

DIANE SAWYER: You know, it’s not even possible that that would happen, that we know, it’s just not possible. There are several things that make all of these sort of unnecessary speculations because, that’s not possible. The second thing is about talking to the spooks, we know we are all the time as we do an interview, we take it, we go and check it. We go and check it with people in the Defense Department. So you’re checking something you’ve just learned while you are informing them. We all know it’s cross pollinating, so you are informing them, but we are going to inform everybody else as well so, it tends to be porous that way anyway.

The trickier thing with bin Laden himself, and I think you may be right
about the Egyptians, by the way, but the tricky thing with him is the way he operates. As we know from John Miller’s interview, which was 1998, am I right 98?

WALTER ISAACSON: Hum, hum

DIANE SAWYER: He goes over there, right, you’re driven this interminable distance, you wait, you wait, there are the guys coming out with the rifles shooting in the air, and then you’re driven another distance, you’re not told where you are, you’re served Pepsi all along the way, which one of the ways you know you are going toward bin Laden, you get closer, and closer and closer -- and I love his description – anyway, he gets there. bin Laden comes in, he sits down for the interview and there are flies swarming around. And the aides are so upset that there are flies on him, and they are fumigating the room, and they are batting these flies, and they won’t let...
the interview start. And he has his own camera people there, because maybe he likes the way he looks on his own camera, and here is what happens to John Miller: he has come all this distance, and they say you can’t have an interpreter. [Laughter] That’s true. So he asks his questions, and got a fusillade of Pashto, or whatever he was speaking, or Arabic from bin Laden, and had no idea what he had said [Laughter]. Now do you sit there and continue to pose your questions? Or do you go all the way back with your, in your jeep, having come all this way?

BEN BRADLEE: It was not recorded?

DIANE SAWYER: It was recorded, it was recorded, but he couldn’t follow up. He had no idea what was being said to him. And that, you know, there are much trickier and real problems that get posed to you along the way to bin Laden.
BEN BRADLEE: Let me give you a security case that Ed Williams, we got Ed Williams to solve for us.

Woodward, who was always at the nexus to all of these things, came to me once and said that he had a State Department low level clerk in the coding department, or some place right at, where he had some information. He came to him and told him a series of stories it was perfectly plain that no reporter, no citizen had any right to know. None, none, none. So we, there was, it was impossible to write it because if it were true it would be a heinous crime to [print it]. It would cost ten spies their lives, and things like this. So we said, "how could we possibly write that?" We better call Ed, which was the standard.

WALTER ISAACSON: Call the lawyer

BEN BRADLEE: Call the lawyer.

So Ed said, well, I don’t know what to do
about this, and he is said, well, gee, I’d
better go and see Casey or maybe I ought
to go see, I think, Judge Webster,

WALTER ISAACSON: yeah

BEN BRADLEE: was the head of
security this time

DON HEWITT: FBI

BEN BRADLEE: so he went out to
see Webster, and Webster denied it. He
said that’s just not true, this guy, I
don’t know, I’ve never heard of this guy,
and we have no such information. So we
stiffed the guy, and two days later,
Webster calls Williams and said it’s true,
it is all true. This guy is in a position
to know, he is telling people like that,
hetold you about that, and I’ve got to do
something about that. We said, what are
you going to do? Simply as reporters we
were interested. He wasn’t going to kill
him. [Laughter] So what he did, was give
him a job and the guy works in the State
Department today, under the closest, the closest watch you’ve ever had, and it seems to me that the story, I mean, I didn’t, I wouldn’t quibble with how Williams told me to handle it. I mean it was just awful what he said, what is, I can’t remember all the details, and if I did I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t. But

DON HEWITT: Did you not publish it?

BEN BRADLEE: Did not, would not. What would you do?

DON HEWITT: Hum, is he

BEN BRADLEE: What would you do?

Remember Ivy Bells? That was the machine that the Americans developed to lower, it was a bell, a huge like a Liberty Bell, with little slots in it. They lowered it over Soviet cables and they were

DON HEWITT: they listened in

BEN BRADLEE: they intercepted all Russian traffic from Moscow to their
own submarines, atomic submarines all over the world, and Woodward found that out and said "Boy, is that a good story!" And this was, one of the great intelligence assets of the war, the Cold War. No question about it. And so what we, we thought that we had a duty to tell the people that we had heard of such an operation. We did not know, I did not know, at that time who the source was. They were all very upset, and we sent Woodward back and found some more information. He finally got the name of the guy, it was some low-level clerk in the National Security Agency, and let's see, how did it go from there? We said, well we still can't write it because it is an active, huge asset to the United States. It was inconceivable that we would ended by publishing it. And then finally Woodward, I mean, he is the most persistent guy in the world, comes back
and says “it’s gone!” The bell, which used to be refueled by submarines -- they would put, you know, take an old tape out, put a new tape in -- and when the submarine went back looking for the, this particular time, the bell was gone! And which meant only one thing, and I mean

DON HEWITT: it leaked to the Russians

BEN BRADLEE: I mean, the subs had it, and they hoisted it, and it’s now in case anybody wants to see it, it’s in Moscow, in the headquarters of the, in whatever the hell,

WALTER ISAACSON: KGB, the new KGB

DIANE SAWYER: post KGB

BEN BRADLEE: and we finally, and then Casey was still threatening to sue us if we wrote it until we decided, we finally called him up and said that we were going to run it, and NBC had it that
night, before we could get it out

DON HEWITT: And Ben wait.

BEN BRADLEE: Yeah?

DON HEWITT: Sue you on what grounds?

BEN BRADLEE: Sue us, prosecute us for threatening the National Security, if we eliminated, I don’t know, you’re a lawyer, if you waste a huge intelligence asset, you are surely damaging the security

DON HEWITT: Were you more worried about being sued or being called unpatriotic by the world

BEN BRADLEE: sued, I was worried about going to the slammer

DON HEWITT: and your readers

WALTER ISAACSON: yeah. Diane have you ever recently, you or ABC whatever, withheld things out of what, I think Ben called duty?

BEN BRADLEE: Excessive
patriotism

WALTER ISAACSON: Excessive patriotism, well patriotic duty

DIANE SAWYER: Well, we did and I’m not sure, I think CBS may have known too, we did withhold information about the special forces

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, so did we

DIANE SAWYER: we had it hours and hours, and hours before they were going in and we knew a lot about

WALTER ISAACSON: Which by the way the Washington Post put in that morning

DIANE SAWYER: the deployment

WALTER ISAACSON: in a more circumspect way, and we were all asked to hold it and we did. I think we had one, just to give one, that we did, which didn’t comment whether it was right or wrong. That helicopter that crashed last weekend.
He was going in to get a sick American soldier, or sick special forces soldier, and they were unable to rescue him because the helicopter crashed. And they asked us not to, because we had found it out, and asked us not to air it until they were able to complete the operation, which took two days. It wasn’t that hard of a decision. We said okay.

DON HEWITT: See, I don’t have the problems you guys have, since Mike Wallace took on Westmoreland, the military doesn’t talk to us at all any way,

[Laughter] so I don’t even hear these things. We are persona non grate at the Pentagon, which may be the nicest thing that ever happened to us.

[Laughter]

BEN BRADLEE: Yeah, but your, the CBS reporters aren’t.

DON HEWITT: Well, there are guys, no I’m talking about 60 MINUTES is
persona non grata. In fact they have even said it. I said “Are you this way with everybody?” they said “No, just with you.”

[Laughter]

WALTER ISAACSON: More questions? I’m sorry we’ve got one question and yeah?

MALE VOICE: It’s kind of two parts. I think it’s obvious that there was a huge intelligence failure [Off Mike] prior to September 11th.

WALTER ISAACSON: Huge intelligence failure on what, you said?

MALE VOICE: On the part of our government

WALTER ISAACSON: on the part of our government September 11th

MALE VOICE: [Off Mike] the second part is do we, the media, prior to [Off Mike] of course they don’t [Off Mike], but generally speaking do you think there was a failure of the press to address the problem that subsequently came
[Off Mike]

WALTER ISAACSON: Let’s stipulate that we all can say, or you all can’t say all the wonderful things you did do to cover this before, but

BEN BRADLEE: One of the problems is that you don’t know what you don’t know

DON HEWITT: That’s right

BEN BRADLEE: I mean, what if

MALE VOICE: Well let me give you an example the,

BEN BRADLEE: Of course it was a failure

MALE VOICE: the hijacking [Off Mike]

WALTER ISAACSON: What was the question failure [Off Mike]?

BEN BRADLEE: I don’t know about that, I mean, I read about that story, I didn’t know about it when, evidently somebody knew about it, and

DON HEWITT: The French took that
plane in Marseille

WALTER ISAACSON: Huh huh

BEN BRADLEE: Yeah

DON HEWITT: These French commandos went aboard and then grabbed him, because they got wind of it, and I have to assume that French intelligence was a lot better than ours. They knew about a plan to do that, we never knew. You know our guys were kind of like the Keystone Cops, when you really come down to it. You know it’s incredible to me that we spend thirty years trying to figure out how to try to keep a bomb off an airplane and never dawned on one of these guys that an airplane is a bomb. That for the price of an airline ticket you can turn a plane into a missile, and it’s just, the guys we pay, well I think the problem has been that the CIA has been so busy looking for spies in this outfit, and the FBI is so busy why its slams don’t
work that they never had the time to spend on national security. And what blows my mind is the stories everyday, the FBI admits they haven’t got a clue where the anthrax is coming from. You know this is the greatest police force on earth. There’s got to be a lab somewhere that’s doing this, and they don’t have a clue. That’s scares me, more than almost anything else that’s happened, that the FBI cannot tell where or, they haven’t even begun to find out.

DIANE SAWYER: Well, I just, sure things. First of all I think we are reporting the failure of the intelligence community

DON HEWITT: Sure we are

DIANE SAWYER: It’s on the front page of papers all the time, it’s always the same things, which we know, nobody speaking Arabic,

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah
DIANE SAWYER: It’s extremely difficult to infiltrate cave people, except for Mike Wallace. [Laughter] Cave men, original cave man.

WALTER ISAACSON: I think she was referring to the 60 MINUTES crew as cave people.

DIANE SAWYER: Right, and then I have to violate your rule by saying one wonderful thing about myself, which is I did an hour on bioterrorism. First interview with Ken Alibek who was the defector from the Soviet Union who was in charge of the Biopreparat, and we, I flew over to Siberia, I went inside the facilities. They did it. It was a fine hour. I was so proud of it. We covered every single issue that is now being covered daily. People watched, but then they went back to something else, and I think to some extent, it’s always deemed that we didn’t cover enough, when in fact
it’s very hard for any of us, it’s human nature to pay enough attention, to feel it personally, to be roused to political and personal political action in a time when you don’t feel imminently threatened. And even though we kept saying the smallpox is coming, the anthrax is coming, let us show you what will happen, let us show you how unprepared, everyone says ooh, that’s a problem.

WALTER ISAACSON: Well you get hit both ways. You start saying smallpox could be coming, here’s how unprepared we are, and everybody says why are we frightening everybody.

BEN BRADLEE: Yeah

WALTER ISAACSON: And this is horrible

BEN BRADLEE: There’s a lot of that

WALTER ISAACSON: And you’re just doing to scare up ratings, more, yes, back
there, Sir

MALE VOICE: Churchill [Off Mike]

how far are you permitted to allow the
government to lie to the public, and if
your standard for disclosure of
information that you have changed in the
face of the government lies as opposed to
the government silences?

WALTER ISAACSON: Did everybody
kind of hear that?

BEN BRADLEE: No repeat it

WALTER ISAACSON: Okay, I’m going
to try to repeat it which is Churchill’s
quote about truth has to be protected by a
bodyguard of lies. How willing are we, in
the media, to put up with the lies or
something, or would that change how we
cover things. It’s not a very good
summary, but is that about right?

Just really quickly, I actually
think, because people keep on asking us
that, whether it’s Dr. Rice, or Secretary
Rumsfeld and all, they have been very careful to try not to lie to us. Because we almost have an implicit deal, I mean, they call, they tell us some things, they say please don’t do that. Well, you know, they almost frighten us by calling and saying, that helicopter went in to this region to rescue this soldier, and please don’t say that for two days, because we are trying to get that soldier out. And you feel “Why are you telling me so much?” You know, it’s almost, they are very careful not to lie. I don’t know that they’ve lied out right to us, although there are obviously the propaganda, the spin, that sort of things.

BEN BRADLEE: And I think that’s the line you draw. If they lie, forget it. They are asking for all they get, if they lie. I mean, the wisdom of the ages often cries out for silence, let them shut up, and let the editors shut up about it.
If they don’t know it, poor babies. We’ve got five editions a day, 365 days a year. We’ll get it, we really will get it, sooner or later.

I think it’s a silly fight, but I think if they lie to you, I think

BEN BRADLEE: I just saw Ben Slash [Phonetic] tapes for next Sunday about the Tonkin Gulf

DON HEWITT: Where Johnson is basically saying. It didn’t happen

DON HEWITT: I don’t believe it, it didn’t happen

BEN BRADLEE: It didn’t happen.

Think of that for a minute.

WALTER ISAACSON: They are lying

BEN BRADLEE: Who the hell

DON HEWITT: They didn’t lie, of all the scandals, he was right in the middle of the Nixon Watergate, there was the Iran-gate scandal, there never was a more damaging scandal in this country than
Lyndon Johnson lying about the Gulf of Tonkin, and got us into a war that did more damage to this country than Watergate did, or Iran-gate, and that was a lie by Lyndon Johnson. And

BEN BRADLEE: And they are now [Unintelligible] with their publishers that there never was a Tonkin Gulf battle after a vote of 98 to nothing, or 98 to 1

WALTER ISAACSON: One, to 1

DON HEWITT: Gruening

WALTER ISAACSON: Wayne Morse

DON HEWITT: Gruening

WALTER ISAACSON: Very good, now Wayne Morse

DON HEWITT: Gruening

BEN BRADLEE: No, Wayne Morse

DON HEWITT: Gruening of Alaska

BEN BRADLEE: Wayne Morse, I promise, Gruening I think was dead

WALTER ISAACSON: Somebody go and look up who opposed the Gulf of Tonkin
Resolution

BEN BRADLEE: I think it might be two

DON HEWITT: maybe it was the other on

BEN BRADLEE: But I mean, that was, if you had, if you had known that, it was a lie and published it, you would have had a tough ten days, I’ll tell you

WALTER ISAACSON: Ben, all right, next. Yes Sir?

MALE VOICE: Oh hi, a Tonkin person

MALE VOICE: [Off Mike]

WALTER ISAACSON: Seventeen minutes, but who is counting?

DON HEWITT: An hour and an half of what?

MALE VOICE: truck in Texas [Off Mike] police chase

DON HEWITT: It was kind of amusing, it was fun, it was like reading
Page 6. [Laughter] What was wrong with that? I don’t know what harm he did

WALTER ISAACSON: Defend me Don!

DON HEWITT: I loved it, it was great

MALE VOICE: [Off Mike]

DON HEWITT: So what

MALE VOICE: [Off Mike] I was watching, [Off Mike] CNN is a television station of the world [Off Mike]. Anyway do you at all feel responsible for the image of America [Off Mike] through the orchestration of your programs?

WALTER ISAACSON: Are you talking to me?

DON HEWITT: and entirely doing too much bad news [Laughter]

MALE VOICE: Too much bad news and not enough about the good things happening in the world.

DIANE SAWYER: First of all, what is it 50 percent of the, of Pakistan,
Afghanistan, anyway the core regions that we are talking about are under 18, and we are talking about, if we are talking about the breeding ground of discontent, it is not because they are watching CNN, and watching a truck go down it, or watching Dynasty for that matter.

DON HEWITT: That’s right

DIANE SAWYER: You’re talking about what’s going on in the Talibani institutions themselves which is a very different thing

DON HEWITT: Here, here

DIANE SAWYER: The second thing is, probably entertainment television, or not television even, just entertainment has more of a connection than news coverage does, and the third thing is that it’s just, you know, it’s always going to be true of the world that what export is what is memorable. And I can’t remember, I was working for you Don,
DON HEWITT: Yes you were

DIANE SAWYER: I was working for you, and I went to the Amazon, do you remember that piece I did? Went down into the Amazon

WALTER ISAACSON: Say yes Don

DIANE SAWYER: you didn’t like it very much so, [Laughter]

DON HEWITT: What’s her name?

DIANE SAWYER: Anyway, we went into the Amazon, we have a tribe, they have never seen outsiders before, we battle our way through, we hike, we drive, we sweat, we hack our way into the jungle, and the chief of the tribe starts to come towards us, and I’m looking at him trying to adjust my eyes because I could swear I’m seeing lips and a tongue or something on his T-shirt and he is wearing a Rocky Horror Show T-shirt okay [Laughter]. I think the impact of American culture around the world is both it’s greatest
dynamic and you pay some price for it.

But I don’t think that’s where our failure to make a case for ourselves is taking place.

BEN BRADLEE: Let me, to the guy who asked about good news vs bad news, that’s the oldest argument in the business, at least to me, I have spent more time on that. Russ Wiggins, who was my predecessor at the Post, used to say “Bradlee, 450 planes land safely every day at national airports, and there isn’t a line in the goddamn paper about it, and one of them cracks up and there is.”

Okay, that’s one observation about it. The other is we went to the expense once of having some stamps made of the little face with the lips going down, the lips straight, and the lips turned up. Smile, nothing, despair. And we went through the paper stamping every goddamn story, and we had about three teams doing it. First
thing that was said about it, there was very little agreement about what was bad news and what was good news. Yankees lose the World Series, big good news for some of them, some of us Bostonians, if the Redskins lose, the same way, so most of the sport section was good news; the obits, pretty hard to given them a hell of a lot [Laughter]. So what we’re talking about are the crime stories. Some of those, if they catch a criminal, and you know, you go through it, and there is, you begin to worry whether there is too much blandness. Lots of smile, lots of nothing, and less than half, or less than a third of bad news. You know, nobody agrees on what’s good news and what’s bad news.

WALTER ISAACSON: Let me add one footnote, which is that in this environment, you don’t get ratings by doing bad news per se in terms of what’s
bad for America. That’s a lot tougher, you get a lot of blowback and you can lose audience if you sort of say that the war is not going well, or something like that. And secondly, no, CNN International didn’t take the truck chase. We only did it on CNN Domestic. [Laughter] Yes Sir?

MALE VOICE: You guys don’t seem to be afraid of the United States government [Off Mike]

WALTER ISAACSON: Huh, huh, good question. Frankly I think we spent more time, I do, worrying about bad blowback from the public if we do something. If David Westin said something, he doesn’t have to worry about the government, he’s got to worry about

DIANE SAWYER: My mother

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, your mother, go ahead tell that story

DIANE SAWYER: No, no

WALTER ISAACSON: All right, okay
Diane Sawyer: I can tell the charts the chorus exactly from

Walter Isaacson: David Westin's lips

Diane Sawyer: but being reported by Drudge, going to Rush Limbaugh, and twelve minutes later my mother is on the phone to me so, I can tell you exactly the trajectory is around the country.

Walter Isaacson: I don't know do you, I mean, [Off Mike] Ben

Ben Bradlee: Well, I mean, I don't have those kinds of worry anymore, but the Post is not widely read outside the country. It's not like the New York Times, and so I don't think the Post has gotten that much of it. Of course you worry about it, I mean if everybody hates you, or hates your columnists, or hates what you're doing, you'd be stunned at the shadow you cast. My secretary's mother and father went through the Greenbrier
Hotel the other day, where they were staying, and one of the things that happened, is that the Greenbrier now is taking guests to the place, the basement, where they were going to put all the congress, the senators and the congressmen, three cots to a room, and apparently there is this lovely lady who is the guide, a volunteer, a docent they call them, and she is so sore at the Washington Post, and she is 78 or 79, my age, years old.

WALTER ISAACSON: Younger than you.

BEN BRADLEE: Younger than me.

Jesus, there’s no quitting in you, is there? [Laughter] and she says how terrible it was for the Washington Post to, you know, and it was fifty years ago. [Laughter] Anyway pissed me off.

DON HEWITT: yeah, I bet

WALTER ISAACSON: Sorry, any
more?

DIANE SAWYER: To go back to

David Westin for a minute, we were talking
about he had said, and if you take what he
said, we all know what he was talking
about, and we all know

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, that he
was not saying anything insidious

DIANE SAWYER: No, not at all,
not at all, but the ability to disentangle
something, once it’s out there

WALTER ISAACSON: not intending
to say anything insidious, I mean he was

DIANE SAWYER: Yeah, but the
ability to disentangle it from the
reaction is something, I think that
worries people, it’s not that you hedge
what you say because you’re worried about
that, but you do worry that the small
thing taken and turned, and spun out there
can never be back and exploited again

WALTER ISAACSON: Can it be fair
to say that on the air, and in the things you do, you may be more worried, in this environment, about viewers and the average citizen taking things out of context, than about what the government might do to you?

DON HEWITT: The mail is no different now than it ever was. Some of them love you, some hate you, but they watch you. Look up here are four people associated with successful enterprises, I don’t think we sit around and worry about all the things and we’ve had to answer, we do what we do, and to coin a phrase: “Let the devil take the high most.” I never knew what that meant [Laughter] I’ve been using it for years, but if you, you’re hired for a job, Ben was hired to be the executive editor of the Washington Post, Diane’s hired to run two broadcasts on ABC, I’m hired to do 60 MINUTES, you’re hired

BEN BRADLEE: Walter here, yeah
DON HEWITT: to, you worked at Time magazine, you are hired to run CNN, so you do what you’ve learned to do over the years. And there are always these irritations, always these things come up. And it isn’t just now. It happens all the time. You’ve got viewers, you’ve got readers who take issue with you. That’s part of the business you’re in.

DIANE SAWYER: I also think you are going to see a lot more provocative debate now, don’t you feel it?

WALTER ISAACSON: Explain, I mean yeah, but I understand what you’re saying

DIANE SAWYER: I feel we’re at where everybody is starved for provocative thoughts, for there not to be one opinion on everything, and that

BEN BRADLEE: I don’t know if I agree with that

DIANE SAWYER: we’re all, you don’t think so?
WALTER ISAACSON: Ben?

BEN BRADLEE: Well, I think, it would be nice to run into some people who didn’t have an opinion.

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah

BEN BRADLEE: But we’re just going to wait, wait, you know wait a couple of days before they add a bit. [Laughter] That would be fantastic.

DON HEWITT: I’ve lived through a time when CBS

BEN BRADLEE: that would be fantastic

DON HEWITT: was the communist broadcasters, I mean we were the crazy left wing. Eric Sevareid and Edward R. Murrow were always on the wrong side. They’d taken on Joe McCarthy. You live through all that. That’s part of what you do for a living, and then it disappeared. Now they probably think we are on the other side. I don’t know. But that’s
what happens when you’re in this business.

DIANE SAWYER: You’ve never been scolded by that horrible mail? You never had mail that really did wound you? Come on

BEN BRADLEE: No, if they call up, you know I called this guy, I love it, I called him up and I hollered at him a lot. You see, I get it out of me that way

WALTER ISAACSON: I’ll disagree with you in a second, and use this as a way to set up our closing comments, which is maybe your age with all, you know, all you’ve done

BEN BRADLEE: Jesus! He is terrible about that

DON HEWITT: you can be dead by now

WALTER ISAACSON: you can afford not to worry, but in this environment, it feels slightly different to me. Which is, if you get on the wrong side of, you know,
some of the public opinion, or how you’re covering things, do you seem to, you know, not be patriotic enough, you can get in trouble in this environment

DON HEWITT: Are you feeling that now?

WALTER ISAACSON: I think all, I mean, I think David Westin felt it worse. But yes, I feel far more worry about people misunderstanding what we do, if we are going to be covering from Kabul to Kandahar stuff, than I worry about the government or libel laws or censuring us. And I think there is a time when there is a little bit less tolerance for some questioning

DON HEWITT: But they are watching you, right?

WALTER ISAACSON: Oh yeah.

DON HEWITT: But then how would they know that they didn’t like what you were doing if they weren’t watching? You
know, you’re going to get that, that’s part of what, it’s been part of the history of journalism for ever. You know, you run into times when your readers or your viewers think that you are less than patriotic, and you live through those times and you put up with it. You, if you don’t override that and do what you think is right, and I don’t do what’s right, and Diane doesn’t do, and Ben didn’t do, then we don’t belong in this business.

WALTER ISAACSON: No, I mean, that’s why I always send people to Kandahar, that’s why we have somebody to go into Kabul, that’s why we’re doing it. I was just saying that I feel, or I’m trying to ask really, you know, that in these times, you know, New York Times had it right that there is a patriotism patrol that’s been attacking, you know, David and will get the next person.

BEN BRADLEE: It will pass.
Everything passes. It wasn’t that big, you know, it wasn’t, I’m sure that half the people in this room, don’t even know what you’re talking about.

DON HEWITT: But do you know what happened?

BEN BRADLEE: David Westin, and what he said up at Columbia. Does everybody in this room knows what they’re talking about?

AUDIENCE: yes

BEN BRADLEE: Everybody? A lot of people don’t, it is [Laughter] I would bet that half this room doesn’t even know about it

WALTER ISAACSON: I’m a lawyer [Interposing]

BEN BRADLEE: It’s not that big a deal, it’s a big deal to us, we’re all incestuous. We all like to play with ourselves for Christ’s sake

WALTER ISAACSON: And also here
the other question I have, which is, you said that people are yearning for provocative debate. I think that the nineties was a frivolous period in which everybody wanted to be on Crossfire and have an opinion in the drop of a hat, about anything, that blue dress, about Monica, about Jon Benet, about OJ, about whatever it was, and be shouting on TV. I think that decade is kind of over, DON HEWITT: it was vaudeville

WALTER ISAACSON: Huh?

DON HEWITT: it was to these times we live in what vaudeville was to the twenties and thirties. They were all acts. You know, the Follies. You want to go in there and have John McLaughlin holler at you. For Christsake, that’s nuts. They do it. Mort Zuckerman goes down there, and John McLaughlin hollers at him. I said, why do you do that?

WALTER ISAACSON: All right sum
it up Diane. [Laughter] You’re in the business

DIANE SAWYER: I think everybody here is really admirable [Laughter] and really, really American, and I hope that all of you out there whom I had to employ over the years will still defend me after this, please, please, several of you who are about to again. No, it’s just great to be here. And by provocative debate, by the way, I really meant, provocative debate. I think when Tom Friedman comes on the air and says, you know, “This is a war to win, and this is a war to win with ground troops, let’s start there.” That’s provocative debate.

WALTER ISAACSON: Yeah, I agree with you there, I think the, we left a decade of vaudevilles, Don said debates, and then we are getting into a time where the debates are more serious.

DIANE SAWYER: Ben
BEN BRADLEE: I’m feeling venerable now, I mean [Laughter], it doesn’t, more patient, and some of this, I mean, a lot of this has been really fascinating, but some of this is not as serious as we are taking it.

DON HEWITT: Right

BEN BRADLEE: Some of this stuff is, some of the things that we are worrying about, the Condoleeza Rice, for whom I have the greatest admiration, I just don’t think that’s an event, and I think that she’s doing well, and Powell is doing well, and Rumsfeld is doing well. We all felt Rumsfeld was going to, you know, tear up the Constitution, and bomb everybody back to the Stone Age. It seems to me that that hasn’t happened. That’s part of this. Let’s have people say, “I just don’t have an opinion about that.” If you say that on television, it stops the show dead, if you’re on one of those
talk shows. If Larry King turns to you and says “What do you think about something?” and you don’t have an idea about that.

DIANE SAWYER: Can I just say?

Can I say? I just want to say too, you know who is doing really, really well is the American people. And I always think about what Don Hewitt said to me so long ago, which is so wise,

DON HEWITT: Oh my God

DIANE SAWYER: which is “Never underestimate the intelligence of the American people, and never overestimate the information they have.” And I think it’s so true. We are giving them this blizzard of frequently scary information because we believe that information helps. And I think everybody, I think the way people sort it out, react to it, decide the degree of anxiety they will experience is really impressive.
DON HEWITT: I think this country has a lot of problems, I don’t think we’re one of them. I think there are much bigger problems than worrying about whether the press feels independent, put upon by Concoleeza Rice, or they don’t feel it. I think that’s all minor compared to the major problems that are now facing this country. And I think we like to think we are more important that we are, and I’m not sure we are.

WALTER ISAACSON: Well I will say that, I do think in the end the free flow of information which is what this room is dedicated to protecting, is probably the best antidote to what’s happening. When we were once in Kandahar, and then in Kashgar, and we were trying to sort of meet that Afghan region, I remember once being in a tinier little café, coffee-place, and there were kids sitting around in the back. I mean there was a computer,
and we went back, they speak wiga there, and asked what they were doing. They said that they were on the Internet, and so I typed in CNN.com and of course, it’s blocked. And one of them elbows me aside, and types in something and it pops up. I said “What did you do?” He said “Oh, we know how to go through proxy servers in Hong Kong that the censors are clueless about.” And you see, in the end, you know, a sense of liberty, they’ll get there.

Thank you all very much, I appreciated it.

[Applause]

Sandra Baron: And indeed on behalf of all of you to the four of them, thank you very much. Thank you.

[end of recording]