

A timely film on Murrow and McCarthy

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8 November 2005

Good Night, and Good Luck, directed by George Clooney, written by George Clooney and Grant Heslov

Edward R. Murrow is one of those public figures for whom the adjective legendary, often attached to his name, is not altogether out of place. The American broadcast journalist, whose career spanned the quarter century from 1935 to 1961, stands out as a towering figure when compared to every current television anchor and pundit, without exception.

Murrow, born in 1908, joined the Columbia Broadcasting System during the days of radio in the Depression years and became widely known for his broadcasts from London during the Blitz in World War II. He then made the transition to television in the postwar period, when he hosted both the well-known *See It Now* newsmagazine, as well as the lighter *Person to Person*, with its celebrity interviews.

Murrow has been dead for 40 years, and the period when he spoke to Americans through the medium of television seems very distant. He was a journalist when there was still room for journalism on the small screen, and he was a commentator who wrote his own scripts and who never talked down to his audience of millions.

A high point of Murrow's television career was his confrontation with Joe McCarthy, the redbaiting junior Senator from Wisconsin who climbed aboard the anticommunist bandwagon and whose name became synonymous with the period of witch-hunting hysteria that began after the Second World War and peaked in 1954.

Murrow's exposure of McCarthy is the central subject of the new film by George Clooney, *Good Night, and Good Luck*—the title of the movie is taken from Murrow's television sign-off. Clooney, best known as a television and film actor, is an outspoken liberal and Murrow is clearly one of his heroes. He has made a serious and thoughtful film, despite some obvious limitations. Fifty-one years after the events portrayed in the film, this re-creation should be widely seen, if only to make this crucial period come alive to the many who have only the faintest idea of the significance of McCarthy and McCarthyism.

To say the film is timely is an understatement. Today's headlines point to the existence of a McCarthyite campaign of character assassination and dirty tricks, this time orchestrated from the White House, not by a junior Senator from the Midwest. Just as in McCarthy's day, the prime victims of the campaign are not simply or even primarily the "Communist menace" (in today's version, the terrorist threat). No, the campaign is directed against those within the political establishment itself who do not line up with sufficient enthusiasm behind the policies of preemptive war,

the use of torture and other blatant violations of traditional bourgeois legality.

Moreover, as Clooney clearly wants his audience to note, there is no Edward R. Murrow challenging the use of smears and lies today. On the contrary, the television and print media has generally gone along with them and in key instances legitimized them, at least until recently.

Clooney presents the events of 1954 in documentary style. His use of black-and-white not only conjures up the period of black and white television of the 1950s; it also meshes well with the decision not to use an actor to play McCarthy, but rather to let the Senator speak for himself through old television footage, including hearings before his Senate Internal Security Subcommittee.

The story is presented from the vantage point of Murrow and his associates at CBS, with almost all of the "action" taking place in the CBS studios. The screenplay, by Clooney and Grant Heslov, relies heavily and quite powerfully on Murrow's own scripts for his *See It Now* programs.

Murrow produced several episodes of *See It Now* dealing with the anticommunist witch-hunt. This climaxed with the broadcast of March 9, 1954. Murrow used recordings of McCarthy in action, enabling the newsman to marshal his arguments all the more effectively. "No one familiar with the history of this country can deny that Congressional committees are useful," Murrow told his audience. "It is necessary to investigate before legislating. But the line between investigating and persecuting is a very fine one, and the junior senator from Wisconsin has stepped over it repeatedly."

Murrow invited the senator to make a rebuttal on a subsequent edition of the show. McCarthy's performance, presented via archival film, is absorbing to watch. He calls Murrow "the cleverest of the jackal pack ... 20 years ago he engaged in propaganda for Communist causes."

The film also includes brief excerpts from the Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954, where the Army attorney Joseph Welch shames McCarthy with the soon-to-be-famous words, "Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you no sense of decency?" These hearings came several months after Murrow's exposure of McCarthy, and took place against the background of a public shift against McCarthy and his methods.

All of this material is well edited and fascinating. As for Murrow and the rest of the CBS newsmen (and one woman), the cast is uniformly excellent, beginning with David Strathairn as Murrow. Clooney himself plays Fred Friendly, the producer of the show, Murrow's closest collaborator and a major figure in the development of television news in the postwar period. Others in the cast include Robert Downey, Jr. and Patricia Clarkson as Joe

and Shirley Wershba. The Wershbas are alive and testified to the accuracy of the portrayals. Ray Wise portrays Don Hollenbeck, the CBS newsman who was driven to suicide by redbaiting attacks in the press. The off-screen death of Hollenbeck, and the reaction of his colleagues, drives home the seriousness of the witch-hunt and its human consequences.

One major weakness of the film is the relative absence of historical context. The confrontation, understandably, is between Murrow and McCarthy. More background is needed to fully grasp the significance of this conflict, however.

McCarthy was not the only witch-hunter, nor was Murrow, for all of his integrity, a man who singlehandedly defeated him. The anticommunist crusade was stepped up almost immediately after the end of the Second World War. By 1948, 10 unions had been expelled from the CIO union federation on charges of Communist influence. The Korean War began in 1950, followed by the Smith Act trials of the leaders of the Communist Party and the arrest on espionage charges of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in June 1953. Police departments in all major cities set up Red Squads, working with the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover, to spy on “subversives.” The Internal Security Act of 1950, also called the McCarran Act, was followed two years later by the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act, which included provisions banning entry into the US and the deportation of non-citizens deemed “un-American” in their views.

Murrow, while clearly a principled liberal, went along with much of the anticommunist campaign as the Cold War began. In fact, he later headed the US Information Agency in the Kennedy administration, after leaving CBS.

The official anticommunism was crucial in producing McCarthy, in setting the stage in which he could carry out his attacks. Whatever Murrow’s doubts or disagreements, it was only when McCarthy began to provoke growing opposition within the ruling elite itself that Murrow took the initiative to produce his exposure.

This does not mean that Murrow was not sincerely devoted to the defense of democratic rights. His role encapsulates the contradictions of American liberalism, and in this period Murrow took a far more principled position than most.

He clashed with the owner of CBS, William Paley, over the show on McCarthy, as well as on many other occasions. Paley, portrayed in the film by Frank Langella, is a media mogul of a far different type than his counterparts today. He clearly respects Murrow’s work, and the two meet and argue as equals, on a first-name basis. But Paley is not prepared to sacrifice either CBS’s profits or his political influence so that Murrow can proceed with his hard-hitting exposures. At one point Paley angrily tells Murrow, “I write your check,” and threatens to put an end to the show. Eventually Paley told Murrow he was tired of the constant “stomach aches” over the program, and the last episode of *See It Now* aired in 1958.

To his credit, Clooney wants his audience to consider the pertinence of Murrow’s story today. ‘Where is Edward R. Murrow when we need him?’ the film seems to ask.

This raises important and complex issues related to the nature of the media in capitalist society and the important political changes that have taken place in the past 50 years, including the sharp shift

to the right within the ruling elite.

The decisions of the media, a part of this ruling elite, are not solely based on commercial considerations, but on the fundamental interests of the ruling class as a whole. In the 1950s there was a more significant constituency within the elite for certain democratic norms. Even then, Murrow was eventually pushed aside.

There are a handful of older television news figures, people of the generation following Murrow, who undoubtedly have tried, as they see it, to follow in Murrow’s footsteps. Their fate has not been a very fortunate one.

Dan Rather, when he tried to conduct his own exposure during the 2004 election campaign, left it on the level of Bush’s National Guard service, falling into the trap set for him and soon resigning from CBS in semi-disgrace.

Bill Moyers, the longtime television commentator, primarily in public broadcasting, is perhaps closest to the mold of Murrow. But Moyers has been marginalized for many years and recently left his PBS newsmagazine program after a virulent campaign against him by the ultra right.

If there is no Murrow today, it is not primarily the result of personal traits, but for more fundamental political reasons. If Murrow were around now, he would not be hosting *See It Now*. The tone today is set by Rupert Murdoch’s media empire, which mockingly adopts the “fair and balanced” motto. Someone like Murrow, openly acknowledging, as he did in one sharp exchange with Paley, that there are *not* two sides to every question, would not even get a hearing.

Good Night, and Good Luck opens with Murrow delivering a speech to broadcast industry executives in 1958. His comments are remarkably prescient, as far as they go, and it is difficult to imagine any major figure in the media making them today. “We are currently wealthy, fat, comfortable and complacent,” said Murrow. “We have currently a built-in allergy to unpleasant or disturbing information. Our mass media reflect this. But unless we get up off our fat surpluses and recognize that television in the main is being used to distract, delude, amuse and insulate us, then television and those who finance it, those who look at it and those who work at it, may see a totally different picture too late.”

Murrow’s worst fears about the use of television to delude a mass audience have long since come to pass. While his own outlook, as expressed in his 1958 speech, did not go beyond an appeal to the consciences of the corporate leaders, this in no way minimizes the significance of his career. *Good Night, and Good Luck* accurately depicts an important episode in American history, and it deserves a far wider audience than it is likely to get.



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