

# Tim Russert and the decay of the American media

David North, David Walsh  
16 June 2008

Tim Russert, longtime moderator of NBC's "Meet the Press" and the television network's Washington Bureau Chief, died June 13 of a heart attack in Washington at the age of 58. Russert also hosted a CNBC/MSNBC weekend interview program and was a frequent correspondent and guest on NBC's "The Today Show" and "Hardball."

Russert was comparatively young, and he leaves behind a wife and grown son. It is appropriate to extend sympathy to his friends and family. However, inasmuch as the death of Russert is being treated by the political establishment and the media as a major national political event, one must treat it on those terms.

Indeed, tributes to the NBC newsman have filled the airwaves since his death on Friday. President Bush as well as Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama and his Republican counterpart John McCain have all gone before the TV cameras to mourn his passing. The coverage of his death and the tributes themselves have been vastly out of proportion to the real significance and accomplishments, such as they were, of the deceased.

The treatment of Russert's demise, in its own peculiar fashion, speaks more eloquently about the state of American journalism and the milieu of which he was a part than it does about Russert. No doubt there is shock over the abruptness and unexpectedness of his death, for it is a troubling reminder to the social elite that success, celebrity and immense amounts of money do not bestow immortality, or even, necessarily, a long life.

In the end, after all, Russert was a celebrity, little more than that. Was he an important or insightful journalist? Or a serious political thinker? There is no evidence to support such claims. In spite of his lengthy tenure as anchor of a major news program (he was the longest-serving moderator of "Meet the Press"), it is not possible to link Russert's name to a significant journalistic work or even an instance of acute political analysis. On the contrary. He was a typical representative of what passes for journalism in the United States' corporate-controlled media: conformist and philistine in his views, a purveyor of received wisdom who had no doubts whatever about the values and legitimacy of the political establishment.

One has only to consider certain of the events that occurred "on his watch": the Clinton impeachment, the stolen 2000 election, September 11, the Iraq war and its aftermath. None of these events evoked from Russert a critical examination of the claims of the state and its representatives.

In each case, Russert's essential role was to bolster the establishment and lull the population to sleep. His role in the Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal, an episode that did a great deal for his career, was particularly filthy. In the first days of the crisis, Russert

breathlessly asserted that if the allegations about Clinton's sexual impropriety were true, the president would have to resign. "Whether it will come to that," Russert continued, "I don't know, and I don't think it's right or fair to be in the speculation game. But I do not underestimate anything happening at this point. The next 48 to 72 hours are critical." The population largely rejected the media campaign.

As the WWSW wrote in 2000, in a survey of television personnel: "Russert was one of those who claimed to be taking the moral high ground, castigating Clinton's behavior, while spreading the salacious gossip put out by the right wing. (Typical Russert sound-bite: 'There are lots of suggestions coming out of people close to Ken Starr that perhaps the Secret Service 'facilitated' [i.e., pimped] for President Clinton. Remember that code word—it was used by state troopers in Little Rock.... Was the Secret Service—was a Secret Service agent—an accomplice in trying to cover up a relationship with Monica Lewinsky?' The fact that this story, and dozens like it, attributed to 'unnamed sources,' proved to be false, never stopped Russert and his media cohorts.)"

It is pathetic to hear eulogists praise, as a moment of unsurpassed inspiration and an indication of his uncanny ability to summarize complicated events in a popular manner, Russert's holding up of a white board with the word "Florida" written three times on election night 2000. This on the very night when FOX News was rigging the election outcome.

The notion that Russert asked the "tough questions" of those he interviewed, advanced by a host of former colleagues on a tribute broadcast this Sunday in place of "Meet the Press," is absurd.

During the run-up to the war, Russert, along with the rest of the media, provided a platform for Vice President Dick Cheney and others to present their lying claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction without seriously calling any of them into question.

On March 16, 2003, only days before the US-led invasion of Iraq, Russert virtually handed his program over to Cheney, providing the latter with a propaganda opportunity in front of a large national audience, much of it skeptical about the administration's claims. Russert's particular role here was to politely raise certain doubts and allow Cheney to allay them.

For example, Russert asked Cheney: "What do you think is the most important rationale for going to war with Iraq?" The vice president replied, "Well, I think I've just given it, Tim, in terms of the combination of his development and use of chemical weapons, his development of biological weapons, his pursuit of nuclear weapons." Russert responded: "And even though the International Atomic Energy Agency said he does not have a nuclear program, we

disagree?”

Cheney: “I disagree, yes. And you’ll find the CIA, for example, and other key parts of our intelligence community disagree. ... And I think if you look at the track record of the International Atomic Energy Agency and this kind of issue, especially where Iraq’s concerned, they have consistently underestimated or missed what it was Saddam Hussein was doing. I don’t have any reason to believe they’re any more valid this time than they’ve been in the past.” That matter being settled, Russert was on to the next question.

In Bill Moyers’ documentary, *Buying the War*, Russert claims that he didn’t raise sufficient doubts about what Cheney and others were telling him because critics and skeptics weren’t contacting him. He tells Moyers: “To this day, I wish my phone had rung, or I had access to them.”

Millions were protesting in the streets, United Nations inspectors, the International Atomic Energy Agency, various foreign governments, not to mention the *World Socialist Web Site* and other left-wing publications, were refuting the Bush government’s claims, but none of this was accessible to Russert. In this, he’s probably being honest. Attuned to what the powerful thought and considering left-wing opinion to be illegitimate, Russert only had ears for Cheney and his fellow conspirators.

In any event, Russert learned nothing from the Iraq war. His program continued to provide a platform for the powerful and the cruel. In July 2006, in the immediate aftermath of the Israeli massacre in the southern village of Qana, in which dozens of women and children perished, he played host on “Meet the Press” to Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations, Dan Gillerman, who proceeded in a predictably cold-blooded fashion to blame the atrocity on Hezbollah.

It is revealing, in its own way, that Russert’s celebrity credentials were burnished with a bestseller about his father, “Big Russ.” It is worth recalling that William Shirer—the old CBS hand who worked with Edward R. Murrow in the 1930s and 1940s—established his reputation with *Berlin Diary*, his account of Germany in the first years of the Nazi regime. He later went on to write (after he had been witch-hunted out of the broadcast media) *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Other reporters from that era, such as Eric Sevareid, left behind memoirs that contained interesting social commentary.

Russert’s *Big Russ*, on the other hand, was nothing but a saccharine account of an America where “traditional” values were honored, where “men were men,” etc. In other words, a fictionalized America, conceived in the mind of a conformist. The book is part of a marketable genre, which includes Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation*, a self-deluding slap-on-the-back account of life in post-war America. It was fitting, in its own way, that Brokaw broke the news of Russert’s death.

Russert was born in Buffalo, New York in 1950, at the height of the Cold War and the anti-communist hysteria in the US, and grew up in an Irish Catholic, working-class family. In his various comments and writings there was not a hint of protest or rebellion against the upbringing. Russert had nothing but praise for the Jesuits and “the nuns.” He intended to become a lawyer or teacher in Buffalo, and had not political and media history intervened, Russert would most likely have become one more figure in and around the corrupt Democratic Party machinery in Erie County.

According to Maria Shriver, former colleague of Russert at NBC and presently wife of the governor of California, Russert had “faith in God, faith in country, faith in family.” There is no particular reason to doubt it.

If one wants to get some picture of life in the Buffalo area in the early 1950s, it is worth turning to Joyce Carol Oates’ *You Must Remember This*. In one of the key early scenes, the father of the lead character, the owner of a furniture store, is hauled in by police on charges of “suspected subversion” and “promulgating of Communist propaganda,” and interrogated for hours, for pointing out in an argument with a customer that the USSR and China “constituted a significantly larger land mass, in toto, than did the United States.”

There were however, others from similar backgrounds, particularly from Russert’s generation, who developed quite differently. Their formative experiences were the Vietnam War, the urban rebellions of the 1960s and the Watergate crisis, and they came to reject the hypocrisy, social conservatism and anti-communism of the church and state. There was never any indication in Russert’s public persona that he drew any critical conclusions from these experiences.

In 1976, after graduating from university and law school, Russert worked on the senatorial campaign of Democrat Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who made his name by attacking the poor and blaming them for their own poverty, and served as Moynihan’s chief of staff for five years. Russert then worked for Democratic Gov. Mario Cuomo, before leaving politics and going to work for NBC in 1984. One of his initial accomplishments was arranging for Pope Paul II’s first interview on American television.

Russert became a household name during the period of the severe decline of the American media, when ignorance, superficiality and cynicism became the hallmarks of all that passed for news and analysis. It is worth noting that in its original format “Meet the Press” had a single guest and a panel of questioners. It went through various permutations, until “Under Russert,” as one commentator notes, “the show was expanded to one hour, and became less of a televised press conference and more focused on Russert, with longer interviews and Russert hosting panels of experts.”

He became immensely wealthy in the process, like many of his media colleagues. Russert’s 6,220-square-foot vacation home on Nantucket Island, for instance, was valued at \$7.2 million in 2008. When reminded of his humble beginnings and eventual success, Russert would apparently exclaim, “What a great country!” No—what bad times!

The media, especially NBC, MSNBC and CNBC, has devoted hours to coverage of Russert’s death. Why? What is being mourned? Human beings, even famous ones, die every day. There are individuals who have made significant contributions in the arts, sciences and even journalism whose deaths go largely unnoticed.

In the case of Russert, it would not be possible for his eulogists to produce a single one of his broadcasts that would evoke a significant emotional, let alone intellectual response—where one would watch and appreciate his insight. There is no “moment” remotely comparable to Murrow’s denunciation of Sen. Joseph McCarthy or Walter Cronkite’s criticism of the Vietnam War on CBS. There is not even a narration of an honest television documentary into some troubling aspect of the American social reality. There is next to nothing.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**