

Tim Russert honored: A “state funeral” for services rendered

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The various services held this week in honor of Tim Russert, longtime moderator of NBC’s “Meet the Press,” underscore the extraordinary degree to which the American media has been integrated into the state apparatus. The ceremonies were far more telling about the current state of the media than those involved probably realized or intended. Russert, who also served as NBC’s Washington Bureau Chief and hosted an interview program on CNBC/MSNBC, died June 13 as the result of a coronary thrombosis.

A simple glance at the guest list for Russert’s funeral and memorial services held Wednesday refutes the claims that he was a “tough” and “objective” journalist. He was someone joined at the hip to the political elite, and the latter fully recognized this by showing up in force to pay him tribute.

Attendees at the private funeral Wednesday morning at Holy Trinity Church in Washington included both major party 2008 presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain; 2004 Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Kerry; Senators Harry Reid, Joseph Biden and Christopher Dodd; former Senators Bill Bradley and Tom Daschle; Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives; former New York governor, Mario Cuomo, and current governor, David Paterson.

Various media and public relations figures were also present, among them Democratic Party strategist James Carville; Clinton administration press secretaries George Stephanopoulos (now of ABC News) and Mike McCurry; NBC anchors Tom Brokaw, Chris Matthews and Matt Lauer (who walked in with former General Electric CEO Jack Welch); CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer and *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd.

Tenor Ronan Tynan sang “Ave Maria” at the funeral, as he had for the 2004 funeral of former US President Ronald Reagan.

More than 1,500 people gathered at Washington’s Kennedy Center for a memorial service later on Wednesday, broadcast by MSNBC, including former President Bill Clinton and his wife, former presidential candidate Senator Hillary Clinton; Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and

former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright; former Republican candidate for president, Senator Bob Dole; former White House aide Karl Rove and “A generous slice of New York and Washington royalty” (*Washington Post*).

The *Post*’s Dana Milbank observed that Russert’s funeral was “the closest thing to a state funeral this town has seen since the deaths of Presidents Reagan and Ford.”

President George Bush, his wife and members of the White House staff attended a wake for Russert June 17 at St. Albans School in Washington.

Meanwhile, the weeklong television coverage of Russert’s demise, particularly on NBC, CNBC and MSNBC, continues. As the *New York Times* noted, “Those who spoke at the afternoon [memorial] service ... labored at times to tell stories that they and others had not shared previously in the endless loop of cable coverage that followed Mr. Russert’s death at 58.”

This extraordinary official response has a political explanation. “Meet the Press” and its counterparts Sunday mornings on CBS, ABC and Fox play a not insignificant role in the American political scene. They offer a platform for top officials and media pundits to influence public opinion on critical issues such as the invasion of Iraq and the “war on terror.” They also are a means by which differences in the ruling elite are aired and a consensus, if possible, worked out.

This role is recognized by those at the top. Vice President Dick Cheney appeared on Russert’s program March 16, 2003, only days before the invasion of Iraq, to present his lying claims to a national audience.

In 2004, when then Cheney communications director Cathie Martin was considering how the vice president could respond publicly to claims that the Bush administration had deliberately misled the country about Iraq’s alleged nuclear program, she made “Option 1” an appearance on “Meet the Press.” According to her notes, made public during the trial of I. Lewis Libby in January 2007, Martin then listed the pros and cons of a Cheney visit to Russert’s program; under “pro,” she wrote, “control message.”

When asked about this note at the Libby trial, Martin bluntly commented: “I suggested we put the vice president on ‘Meet the Press,’ which was a tactic we often used. It’s our best format.”

In response to this revelation, Milbank of the *Washington Post* wrote in January 2007, “Memo to Tim Russert: Dick Cheney thinks he controls you.” Indeed.

Intimate with the functioning of both the corridors of power and the media, Russert was ideally placed to market the policies of the establishment to the public.

The US political elite was not ungrateful. Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, who left the Democratic Party in 2006 because of his open and vocal support for the US war in Iraq, wrote in his office’s June 13 statement on Russert’s death: “Tim became an American institution and the Explainer-in-Chief of our political life. I have very fond memories of Tim both on and off the air. He will be truly missed by all Americans and my prayers are with his family that he loved so much.”

With his not-so-subtle comparison of Russert as ‘Explainer-in-Chief’ of the media to the presidential position of Commander-in-Chief, Lieberman is merely acknowledging the present state of affairs: that the corporate-owned press in the US functions as a disciplined, highly-controlled agency ‘explaining’ the latest twists of state policy to the population, and lulling it to sleep.

The range of official political debate in America is breathtakingly small. “Meet the Press” and the other programs only reinforce that narrowness and parochialism. Before his death, Russert had hosted 23 editions of the Sunday morning program in 2008. Their combined guest lists were dominated by leading figures from the Democratic and Republican parties and various, all-too-familiar media pundits. In short, a handful of the usual political suspects, well-heelled and complacent, sat around and offered their shallow comments about the small change of American politics.

Much of the recent talk was devoted to the Democratic Party primary race and the conflict between the Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton camps. It would be difficult to identify a single unexpected comment or genuine insight.

During this same period, gasoline prices were soaring, foreclosures reached record levels and social misery threatened to engulf millions. Apparently this process did not merit treatment by “Meet the Press,” which, its promotions claim, “has continually featured headline-making interviews with world leaders and U.S. newsmakers every Sunday morning on NBC” for 60 years. (In fact, no “world leaders” have been questioned on “Meet the Press” in 2008; as far as one can tell, no non-US citizen has appeared on the program this year.)

On March 23, Russert made a reference to the economic situation introducing his program: “Our issues this Sunday: The Federal Reserve cuts interest rates again. But Wall Street and Main Street are still nervous about talk of recession, bankruptcy, bailouts and more. What now?” His guests? “With us, the anchor of CNBC’s ‘Closing Bell,’ Maria Bartiromo and the anchor of CNBC’s ‘Street Signs,’ Erin Burnett,” i.e., two media mouthpieces for Wall Street. That was virtually the extent of his coverage of the social crisis in America.

Nor did Russert subject any oil company executives to “tough” questioning during these months.

The “independent”-minded Russert presented one political figure outside the Democratic and Republican parties on the 23 programs, on February 24, and introduced him in the following provocative manner: “Our issues this Sunday: Many Democrats accuse this man of draining votes from Al Gore, which helped elect George W. Bush in 2000. Will he run again as an independent candidate for president in 2008? We will find out this morning. Our guest, Mr. Ralph Nader.”

Later in the same broadcast, Russert carried on in the same vein: “Democrat after Democrat says to this day, ‘Ralph Nader, if your name had not been on that ballot, Al Gore would’ve carried Florida. Exit polls show he would’ve carried Nader voters 2-to-1. Gore would’ve been president and not George Bush. You, Ralph Nader are responsible for what has happened the last seven years.’”

In short, “Meet the Press” under Russert was an incestuous gathering of Washington insiders.

The extravagant, out of proportion farewell this week for Russert—alleged to have once told an NBC executive that “integrity is for paupers”—by wealthy journalists and politicians highlights a situation in which the media, far from representing a Fourth Estate critical and independent of the government, instead functions largely as a propaganda apparatus of the ruling elite, with whom it entertains direct personal and social ties.



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