

# US television personality Mike Wallace dead at 93

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Mike Wallace, the longtime American television journalist best known for his almost four decades on CBS' immensely popular "60 Minutes" news program, died April 7 at the age of 93. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Wallace conducted countless interviews with prominent personalities.

The official canonization of Wallace as a television news "pioneer," a broadcast "legend," a tough "interrogator of the famous and infamous" and so forth needs to be taken with a healthy grain of salt. The media outlets put forth such claims, first perhaps, because in comparison to the empty heads currently populating television news, Wallace may indeed seem a major figure, and, second, to comfort themselves with the thought that American television journalism once amounted to something.

At his best, to do him justice, Wallace did demonstrate a certain sense of history and a degree of intellectual curiosity, traits nearly non-existent in the current network and cable news universe. Some of his televised conversations from the 1950s in particular, with figures such as United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther, former Communist Party leader Earl Browder, leading Democrats Eleanor Roosevelt and Adlai Stevenson, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, author and social critic Aldous Huxley, actors Gloria Swanson and Kirk Douglas, writer Ben Hecht, lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, surrealist painter Salvador Dali, and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, for example, have genuine historical value.

Even those are marred, however, by Wallace's essentially conventional outlook, through which his conformism and anti-communism protrude unpleasantly. For example, in one telling moment in a September 1957 interview, out of the blue, Wallace asks Wright, one of the remarkable artistic and intellectual figures of the twentieth century, about another outstanding personality. "You've heard of Charlie Chaplin's anti-Americanism?" Wallace inquires. To Wright's credit, he eventually responds, "Is there anything more anti-American than McCarthyism?" Wallace then changes the subject.

If Wallace had strong feelings about the world, he clearly subordinated them at virtually every point in his professional life to the pursuit of the main chance. Career and social advancement, being well thought of—and being well-paid (in 2000, Wallace was earning \$3 million a year at "60 Minutes")—by the people who counted, these seem to have been the prime driving forces in his life. The journalist was known for his "hard-hitting" interview

style, but how often did the flow of his questioning at a given moment run counter to the general interests of the American establishment?

The obituaries place Wallace's name alongside those of television newsmen such as Edward R. Murrow (1908-1965) and Walter Cronkite (1916-2009) of CBS News. Neither of those was a towering figure, but Murrow gained credibility as the result of his run-in with Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1954, as well as his exposure of poverty in the US, and Cronkite earned a reputation for honesty for his criticism of the Vietnam War in 1968.

Wallace had no such episode in his career. In general, he jumped on a bandwagon after it was well under way. For instance, his famous "interrogation" of John Ehrlichman in June 1973, a key figure in the Nixon White House and the Watergate scandal, came only after the tide was turning against the administration and Ehrlichman had already been thrown to the wolves.

And Wallace was daring enough to go after the PLO's Yasser Arafat, Manuel Noriega of Panama, the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Russia's Vladimir Putin, all individuals in official America's black books.

It is open to question whether Wallace was even a garden variety liberal, although he kept his "moderate" political opinions largely to himself. His decades-long friendship with the Reagans is suggestive. And there is this. In the wake of the 1968 election, at a time of large-scale protest against the Vietnam War and broad radicalization, president-to-be Richard Nixon thought Wallace sufficiently politically reliable to offer him the post of White House press secretary. According to Fordham University media and communication professor Beth Knobel, "He [Wallace] thought about it long and hard because he really liked Nixon... But in the end, he chose '60 Minutes.'"

Wallace was born in 1918 in Brookline, Massachusetts, in the Boston area, to a Russian Jewish immigrant family. His father owned a wholesale grocery company at that time, although later, when the business went broke, the older Wallace became an insurance salesman. There is no hint of left-wing politics in Wallace's background, unlike many Jewish families of the time.

He attended the University of Michigan, where he got "hooked" on radio, in his own words. Upon graduation, he found work with a radio station in Grand Rapids, Michigan and later a larger station in Detroit. Wallace, who had done some acting in school, announced radio programs such as *The Green Hornet* and *Ned Jordan: Secret Agent*.

When Wallace resumed his broadcast career after a stint in the US Navy in World War II, he worked in radio and then in early television as an announcer, an actor, a game show host and a pitchman in advertisements for various products.

His interviewing career began in 1955 with “Night Beat” and later “The Mike Wallace Interview” in 1957-58. He had apparently found his métier. His chilly self-assertiveness, quick tongue and distinctive speaking voice stood in him in good stead.

A number of the 1957-58 interviews, mentioned above, make fascinating viewing  
[<http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/collections/film/holdings/wallace/>].

Wallace, who also pushed Phillip Morris cigarettes on his program, tended to work from a template. He would often begin an interview by quoting some unfavorable observation from a third party about the guest and ask the latter to respond, in the obvious hopes that sparks would fly. A fairly cheap technique.

At the outset of his conversation with Oscar Hammerstein, for example, Wallace cited critic Kenneth Tynan’s remark about the lyricist’s supposed infatuation for the “simple life” as opposed to “mature wit and urban irony.” For Gloria Swanson’s benefit, he read a columnist’s observations about her lack of beauty and dearth of great acting skill. “What about that?” he demanded rather shrilly of the actress, who had the grace to respond modestly, “I felt even when I was at the top of my career that I’ve never done anything to deserve acclaim.”

The conversation with Walter Reuther of the UAW sheds light on the right-wing, pro-capitalist character of Reuther’s views, as well as the terrible impact of anti-communism, the state religion of postwar America. Wallace obviously intimidated the UAW official with the suggestion that the union’s proposal for profit-sharing in contract negotiations that year was “a Reuther-giant-step towards socialism.”

Reuther responded, “I think this is perhaps the most pro-free enterprise demand that we have ever made. Because the only way you could make free enterprise secure is to give every American a stake in the fruits of its technology.”

In that conversation, Wallace set out his philosophy: “And I think this comes to the principle of the whole thing. A man opens a store or a man opens a company. He risks the money; he has the privilege under our system of free private enterprise, does he not, of deciding what he’s going to do with that money. It is not up to his workers to tell him what he should do.”

Wallace’s career drifted in the late 1950s after ABC cancelled “The Mike Wallace Interview.” In the 1960s he anchored a CBS morning news program and did reporting from Vietnam.

(There is no record of his opposition to that imperialist adventure. Wallace got into trouble over Vietnam long after the war there ended, when he anchored a “CBS Reports” special in 1982 claiming that General William Westmoreland and other US officials had deliberately exaggerated enemy dead during the conflict. Westmoreland sued, and although he ultimately dropped the action, CBS lost its libel insurance and gave up producing substantial documentaries. Wallace was reportedly devastated by the episode and considered suicide.)

After Wallace rejected Nixon’s offer of a job, “60 Minutes”

took to the air in September 1968. These days the Sunday night program, which was among the top ten most popular television programs for 23 consecutive years from 1977, is considered rather staid and sedate news programming, a cut above the sensationalized fare on the cable channels. In its early days, however, “60 Minutes” was viewed as an innovator in the degraded field of tabloid “infotainment.”

An episode in the mid-1990s helped to define Wallace’s legacy. In 1995, a former tobacco industry executive, Jeffrey Wigand, provided information to “60 Minutes” that his firm had systematically concealed the dangers of cigarette smoking and had, moreover, introduced ingredients to cigarettes to enhance the effect of nicotine.

“60 Minutes” producer Lowell Bergman developed a program based on the information but came into conflict with CBS officials, who feared a major lawsuit. In addition, CBS owner Laurence Tisch’s son, who worked for big tobacco, was among those at risk of being charged with perjury for their testimony before Congress. CBS held back the story and Bergman accused Wallace of going along with the self-censorship. The incident forms the basis of *The Insider*, the fine 1999 film directed by Michael Mann.

The overall picture is not a flattering one. It is not, however, so much a portrait of Mike Wallace, as of a news media politically tamed and neutered, focused *at best* on the secondary or tertiary, unable and unwilling to devote its efforts to revealing the harder truths about American society. None of this was Wallace’s creation, but individuals still bear some responsibility for what they do.

Assuredly, Wallace did not invent conformism and anti-communism, much less bring about the sharp right-wing lurch in the media and political establishment over the past several decades. But he did little or nothing to oppose any of it. In fact, he participated in the whole retrograde process. There is no reason for us to join in the media mythologizing about his life and career.



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