

NBC's Tom Brokaw provokes backlash over “assimilation” comment

Patrick Martin
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In remarks at the end of Sunday's broadcast of “Meet the Press,” longtime NBC commentator and former anchorman Tom Brokaw gave vent to the racism, anti-immigrant bigotry and sheer ignorance that media pundits—at least those not employed by Fox News—usually keep under wraps.

His remarks came at the conclusion of a panel discussion about President Trump's demand for a border wall and his overall focus on the supposed evils of immigration, and particularly his demonization of Mexican immigrants.

Brokaw commented as follows:

And a lot of this, we don't want to talk about. But the fact is, on the Republican side, a lot of people see the rise of an extraordinary, important, new constituent in American politics, Hispanics, who will come here and all be Democrats. Also, I hear, when I push people a little harder, “Well, I don't know whether I want brown grandbabies.” I mean, that's also a part of it. It's the intermarriage that is going on and the cultures that are conflicting with each other. I also happen to believe that the Hispanics should work harder at assimilation. That's one of the things I've been saying for a long time. You know, they ought not to be just codified in their communities, but make sure that all their kids are learning to speak English, and that they feel comfortable in the communities. And that's going to take outreach on both sides, frankly.

It would be too charitable to describe these comments

by the 78-year-old Brokaw as muddled. He managed to suggest in the same breath that Hispanics are intermarrying at such a high rate (presumably with whites) as to provoke a racist reaction in the Republican Party (“brown grandbabies”) and that Hispanics are keeping themselves apart “in their communities” and should “work harder at assimilation.”

How these grossly self-contradictory propositions could both be true is a mystery.

No one else on the “Meet the Press” panel objected to his first claim—that the Republican Party is steeped in anti-immigrant racism—since it is obviously true. But his second claim, about the lack of assimilation on the part of Hispanics, drew a rejoinder from Yamiche Alcindor, the former *New York Times* reporter who is now the White House correspondent for National Public Radio.

I would just say that we also need to adjust what we think of as America. You're talking about assimilation. I grew up in Miami, where people speak Spanish, but their kids speak English. And the idea that we think Americans can only speak English, as if Spanish and other languages wasn't always part of America, is, in some ways, troubling.

There was other, harsher, media criticism, most notably from Cecilia Vega of ABC News, who pointed out that Brokaw's comments falsified the actual experience of second-generation Hispanic families like her own, where children grow up speaking Spanish at home, learn English in school, and become completely

bilingual as adults.

Hispanic-American groups loudly protested Brokaw's remarks, as did many Democratic Party politicians, and by Sunday evening the retired anchorman was issuing what passes for an apology in official media and political circles, tweeting, "I am sorry, truly sorry, my comments were offensive to many." He thanked Alcindor for her remarks and concluded, "I never intended to disparage any segment of our rich, diverse society which defines who we are."

Brokaw was the principal anchorman for "NBC Nightly News" for more than 20 years, reaching an annual salary of \$7 million for the task of justifying the crimes of American imperialism around the world (including the US invasion of Iraq in 2003) and presenting as normal the contradictions of a society increasingly divided between a tiny and fabulously wealthy elite and a vast mass of working people struggling to keep their heads above water.

As WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh wrote on Brokaw's retirement in 2004:

In the two decades during which Brokaw presided over the NBC evening news, the American media suffered a dreadful decline. Television news, in particular, has been transformed by economic and political processes into a purely profit-driven operation. More fundamentally, television news programs, packaged (and on occasion criticized) as entertainment, have become organs of state propaganda, transmitting the policies and claims of increasingly right-wing administrations in Washington as "news" and "facts."

It is noteworthy that while Brokaw celebrated those Americans who fought in World War II in his 1998 bestseller *The Greatest Generation*, he had little of the sensibility of journalists of that generation, who had experienced the Great Depression and the horrors of fascism and embraced a more democratic and egalitarian outlook than their successors—multi-millionaire celebrities like Brokaw, Tim Russert and Peter Jennings.

It is impossible to imagine Brokaw, let alone his even

more pallid successors like Chuck Todd, David Muir and Jeff Glor, declaring an American military intervention to be a moral failure, as Walter Cronkite did in 1968, criticizing the Vietnam War.

Particularly since the publication of *The Greatest Generation*, Brokaw has been identified with a bland and sentimental American patriotism, and he himself has been glorified as a sort of media "everyman" and voice of "middle America." His remarks on Sunday give a glimpse of a different reality. His crass ignorance of the everyday lives of Hispanic-Americans—now 25 percent of the US population—expresses the vast social gulf between the wealthy elite, the one-tenth of one percent at the top, and the working class as a whole.



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