

## WALTER CRONKITE ...." THE MOST TRUSTED MAN IN AMERICA"

### EXPOSING THE MYTHS OF THE VIETNAM "CONFLICT"

*Article by Mark Bowden for the New York Times*

THE COMMENTS THAT ROCKED A NATION....AND FINALLY MADE IT REALIZE THE TRUTH.....  
BUT ALSO RECEIVED ITS SHARE OF CRITISM....

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When Walter Cronkite assessed the military's progress in the Vietnam War in 1968, his view departed from the government's official optimism and influenced public opinion.

*One of the enduring myths of the Vietnam War is that it was lost by hostile American press coverage.*

Exhibit A in this narrative is Walter Cronkite, the CBS News anchor, billed as the nation's most trustworthy voice, who on Feb. 27, 1968, *told his audience of millions that the war could not be won.* Commentary like this was remarkable back then because of both custom and the Fairness Doctrine, a federal policy requiring broadcasters to remain neutral about the great questions of the day.

*The doctrine was rescinded in 1987, so now we have whole networks devoted to round-the-clock propaganda.*

But when Cronkite aired his bleak but decidedly middle-of-the-road assessment of the war 50 years ago, immediately after the Tet Offensive, it was a significant departure. It struck like a revelation. From the pinnacle of TV's prime-time reach, he had descended to pronounce:

*"To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion."*

### THE VIDEO OF A PORTION OF THE SPEECH

[COPY LINK TO YOUR BROWSER](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dn2RjahTi3M)

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These were hardly radical words, but the judgment resonated. President Lyndon Johnson certainly felt it. A few weeks later he announced that he would not seek re-election and would devote the remainder of his term to reducing hostilities and moving "toward peace." Not victory, "peace. Cronkite's report was significant.

*It contributed greatly to the shift in public opinion against the war.* But there was no immediate, radical turn. Most polls would continue to show narrowing but clear public support for the war for years to come. Richard Nixon was elected later that year and vigorously prosecuted the war for six years more. If Cronkite was wrong, if the war was being won and winnable, there were ample resources, time, and commitment to prove it. Cronkite was right. *The war was not being won, nor would it be.*

## Walter Cronkite

▣ "For it seems now more certain than ever," Cronkite said, "that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate."

▣ After watching Cronkite's broadcast, LBJ was quoted as saying: *"That's it. If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost middle America."*



*Respected CBS Anchorman turns against the War in Vietnam*

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It was not a war that could be won by firepower, even overwhelming firepower. Edward Lansdale, the country's foremost expert on counterinsurgency, and one with long experience in Vietnam, had counseled as much from the beginning. As the military historian Max Boot writes in his superb biography of the man, "The Road Not Taken," Lansdale told Defense Secretary Robert McNamara on their first meeting in 1961, after dumping a sample of the relatively primitive weapons and rubber sandals and equipment used by the Vietcong on his desk at the Pentagon:

"The people that are fighting there on our side are being supplied with our weapons and uniforms and shoes and all of the best that we have, and we are training them. Yet, the enemy is licking our side. Always keep in mind about Vietnam that the struggle goes far beyond the material things of life. It doesn't take weapons and uniforms and lots of food to win. It takes something else, ideas and ideals, and these guys are using that something else. Let's at least learn that lesson."



We never did. Our ally in Saigon was not a democracy. *It was a notoriously corrupt, one-party, authoritarian state whose only virtue, in American eyes, was that it was not Communist. It survived only through an exorbitant investment of American money, guns, and lives.*

Cronkite had been a believer. He had no objection to the war on moral or even strategic grounds and for years had been faithfully reporting on his nightly broadcast the official accounts of American progress. He did so even as many prominent print journalists filed damaging reports and even as the reports on his program by journalists like Morley Safer and Jack Laurence told a different story altogether.

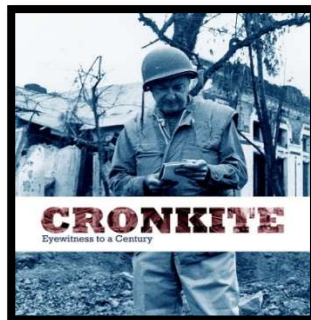
But when the Tet Offensive came, with enemy forces mounting simultaneous attacks throughout South Vietnam in urban centers considered beyond its reach, Cronkite — like the rest of America — was shocked. *He resolved to go to Vietnam to see for himself.*



He saw a lot. Initial reports from Saigon had exaggerated the significance of the surprise raids in that city. The attacks were alarming but ultimately inconsequential and not as damaging as early press reports indicated — missteps that would be documented in detail in Peter Braestrup's influential critique "Big Story." His work has long been cited as proof that the press conspired to turn victory into defeat.

In the long run, though, these overblown initial reports worked to the American military's advantage. The failed effort in Saigon was, according to official accounts, emblematic. *This is the story, Gen. William Westmoreland, the top American commander, told Cronkite.* In a one-on-one interview weeks after the Tet Offensive began, he insisted that what had happened in Saigon had happened throughout the country. The enemy had everywhere been routed.

*He told the anchor "to do his homework properly," according to Douglas Brinkley in his book "Cronkite."*



But even as Westmoreland spoke, 400 miles north, American troops were locked in fierce combat in and around the city of Hue, which, unlike Saigon, the enemy had completely overrun. The fighting there was nowhere near over. House-to-house, block-to-block fighting there would grind on for 25 bloody days, destroying 80 percent of the city and leaving more than 10,000 dead.

*Cronkite arrived in the middle of it and saw for himself that Westmoreland had been lying.*

The battle was reminiscent of the worst urban fighting in World War II, which Cronkite had witnessed as a young reporter. When he got back to New York, he not only told the truth but also tried to correct the impression he had helped to create. And sadly, it didn't come close to ending the war.

Those who argue today that the press, and Cronkite, lost the war are correct in only one sense. Reporters in Vietnam were not perfect. *They were not completely unbiased — the horror of the war repelled many. But they told the truth more consistently than American officials, and it was the truth that ultimately turned America against the war.* An authoritarian government can wage a foolish, losing war indefinitely, but not a democracy.

*For that, we should be grateful. I'll take Cronkite's legacy over Westmoreland's any day.*

**CBS NEWS SPECIAL REPORT – WALTER CRONKITE COMMENTS**  
**FEBRUARY 27, 1968**



*On February 27th, 1968 during a CBS News Special Report, Cronkite did something that changed America's perception of the Vietnam War.*



**THE FULL TEXT OF WALTER CRONKITE'S COMMENTS ON THE CBS NEWS SPECIAL REPORT ON FEB 27, 1968**

"Tonight, back in more familiar surroundings in New York, we'd like to sum up our findings in Vietnam, an analysis that must be speculative, personal, and subjective. Who won and who lost in the great Tet Offensive against the cities? I'm not sure. *The Vietcong did not win by a knockout but neither did we.*

Then, with as much restraint as I could, I turned to our leaders whose idea of negotiation seemed frozen in memories of General McArthur's encounter with the Japanese aboard the Battleship Missouri.

*We've been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders...*

Neither Vietnam nor Washington had faith any longer in the silver linings they found in the darkest clouds. *For it seems now more certain than ever, that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.* To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past.

To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, if unsatisfactory conclusion. On the off chance that military and political analysts are right, in the next few months we must test the enemy's intentions, in case this is indeed his last big gasp before negotiations.

But it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could.

"This is Walter Cronkite. Good night."

#### COMMENT FROM FORMER SENIOR PRODUCER- CBS EVENING NEWS

Ron Bonn, a former senior producer of the "CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite"

Re "Cronkite's 'Stalemate' " (Op-Ed, Feb. 27):

Mark Bowden is correct in attacking the persistent conservative myth that the American press and Walter Cronkite in particular, were somehow responsible for "losing" the Vietnam War when Walter broadcast his comments on the Tet Offensive. He was careful to do so not on his nightly news broadcast, but in a special report. America's heavy involvement in Vietnam was just three years old, stemming from President Lyndon Johnson's massive buildup in 1965.

One thing Walter understood, from his coverage of World War II, was the difference between winning and not winning a war, and that was what he made clear, saying the Vietnam War could not be won.

After 1968, President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger adopted the war in Vietnam as their own and prosecuted it with increasing ferocity and futility for five more years, and the war continued for another two after the American withdrawal. Far more young Americans died, far, far more Vietnamese civilians died, in those seven years than in the preceding three years.

Walter and the press's continuing coverage of the debacle was not responsible for the inevitable collapse of the American puppet state.

#### WALTER'S FINAL SIGNOFF

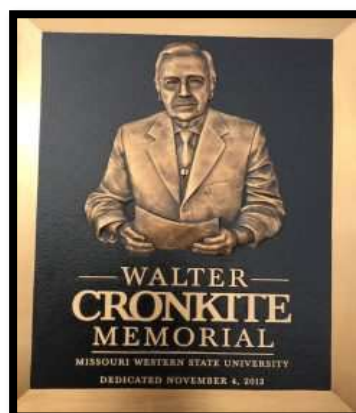
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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuOxYdk-NNc>

#### WALTER CRONKITE MEMORIAL IN ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI.

Legendary television news anchor Walter Cronkite died Friday night (Jul 2009) at the age of 92. Cronkite was the face of CBS from 1962 to 1981. He's being remembered as the "father of television news," as well as the "most trusted man in America"

**THE MEMORIAL WAS DEDICATED ON WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN CRONKITE'S 97<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY**





**MEMORIAL WEBSITE**

(COPY LINK TO YOUR BROWSER)

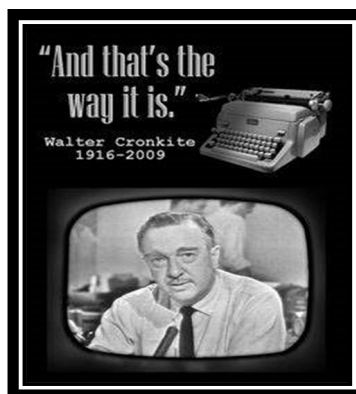
<https://wcm.missouriwestern.edu/>



THE WALTER CRONKITE MEMORIAL BUILDING IN ST. JOSEPH. MO

**"WHATEVER THE COSTS OF OUR LIBRARIES, THE PRICE IS CHEAP COMPARED TO THAT OF AN IGNORANT NATION"**

*Walter Cronkite*

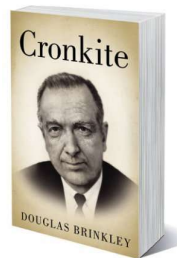






**WALTER & BETSY'S GRAVESITE**  
**MOUNT MORIAH AND FREEMAN CEMETERY IN SOUTH KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI**

### **MORE ABOUT WALTER CRONKITE**



### **AND THAT'S THE WAY IT WAS**

**CRONKITE: A BIOGRAPHY BY DOUGLAS BRINKLEY**

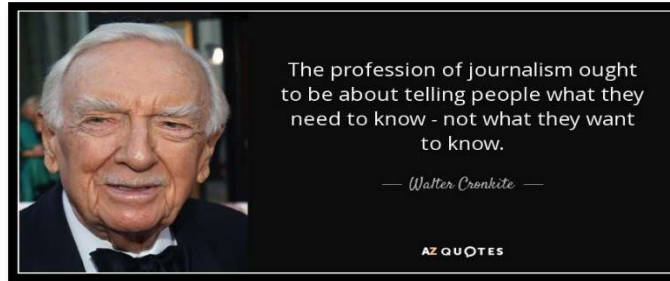


**50+ YEARS AGO, WALTER CRONKITE TOLD AMERICA THE BITTER TRUTH.**  
**WE NEED MORE CRONKITES TODAY.**

### **SOME VERY WISE QUOTES OF WALTER CRONKITE**

*I'm very proud of what Harry Truman turned out to be in office and the record he made. Certainly, I think he'll go down in history as one of the greats, because of his conscience, his determination to stick with what he knew was right".*

*"Not only do we have a right to know, we have to know what our Government is doing in our name. If there's a criticism to be made today, it's that the press isn't doing enough to put pressure on the government to provide information."*



"We're an ignorant nation right now. We're not capable, I do not think, the majority of our people, of making the decisions that have to be made at election time and particularly in the selection of their legislatures and their Congress and the presidency, of course. I don't think we're bright enough to do the job that would preserve our democracy, our republic. I think we're in danger."

"As anchorman of the CBS Evening News, I signed off my nightly broadcasts for nearly two decades with a simple statement: "And that's the way it is." To me, that encapsulates the newsman's highest ideal: to report the facts as he sees them, without regard for the consequences or controversy that may ensue."

"Our job is only to hold up the mirror - to tell and show the public what has happened."

"I am dumbfounded that there hasn't been a crackdown with the libel and slander laws on some of these would-be writers and reporters on the Internet."

"There is no such thing as a little freedom. Either you are all free, or you are not free."

"I think it is essential in a democracy to have competition in the media, a lot of competition, and we seem to be moving away from that."

"Objective journalism and an opinion column are about as similar as the Bible and Playboy magazine."

"Interviewing friends is a tough one. Your duty to the interview must transcend your friendship. Occasionally you'll lose a friend."

"The battle for the airwaves cannot be limited to only those who have the bank accounts to pay for the battle and win it."

"We're living in a state where no one can trust his telephone conversations, nor even his conversations in a room, in a bar, or anywhere else."

"I want to say that probably 24 hours after I told CBS that I was stepping down at my 65th birthday, I was already regretting it. And I regretted it every day since."

"Putting it as strongly as I can, the failure to give free airtime for our political campaigns endangers our democracy."

I covered the Vietnam War. I remember the lies that were told, the lives that were lost - and the shock when, twenty years after the war ended, former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara admitted he knew it was a mistake all along.



PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT EVEN THOUGH THIS INFORMATION HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM WEBSITES & OTHER SOURCES THAT APPEAR TO BE AUTHENTIC, I CAN NOT ENSURE THAT ALL THE DATA IN THIS ARTICLE IS ACCURATE AND CORRECT.