

Fred W. Friendly – 1915 – 1998



FRED FRIENDLY

A formative figure in TV news,
he fought to create its golden age

“TV,” Fred Friendly once said, “is bigger than any story it reports. It’s the greatest teaching tool since the printing press.” Friendly, who died at 82 following a series of strokes, was a founding father of broadcast journalism. Born Ferdinand Friendly Wachenheimer, he changed his name when he entered radio in Providence. Then, with his longtime partner Edward R. Murrow, he more or less invented the TV documentary, teaming on the famous 1954 *See It Now* show that demolished the demagogic Sen. Joseph McCarthy. Known for his high standards and unyielding advocacy, Friendly resigned his CBS News presidency in 1966 when the network refused to interrupt regular programming for a Senate hearing on Vietnam. “He never gave up, he never gave in,” recalled Dan Rather. Said *60 Minutes* executive producer Don Hewitt (between John F. Kennedy, seated, and Friendly): “I learned more from Fred Friendly than anybody I ever worked with.”

From: Life, The Year In Pictures, 1998 – L. to R.: JFK, Don Hewitt, Fred W. Friendly

The above photograph was taken in December 1962, two months after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Fred Friendly had convinced ABC, and NBC along with CBS to conduct a three network interview with JFK.

**From: Due To Circumstances Beyond Our Control – Ch. on Awards Worth Keeping
By Fred Friendly, 1966**

CBS Reports had its share of failures and near-misses. We never managed to do justice to the radical right or left; the one report we tried on economics was too diffuse; we never treated automation or the technological revolution; and we never found a way to investigate the business of sports. We made several attempts to give adequate treatment to the most unreported story of our time, Latin America, but during my tenure at *CBS Reports* we were never able to interest the American audience in the problems of those two hundred and thirty-seven million Americans. After my departure, however, Jack Beck and Charles Kuralt produced "Mexico: A Lesson in Latin," a startling report about one aspect of the dilemma.

Another failure that dogged me through four presidential administrations was that I was never able to get two American Presidents together on the same broadcast. Exploring the power of the Presidency in such first-hand fashion has been a challenge to every television producer, and though no one ever had a better chance to pull it off than I, each time it eluded me. A confrontation between Truman and Eisenhower was unthinkable, because it took years of patience and diplomacy by their wives and friends before the other's name could be mentioned without a response too earthy for television.

My best chance came in the early sixties when I had an opportunity to talk to President Kennedy and former President Eisenhower in the same week. Blair Clark, then general manager of CBS News, a Harvard classmate and close friend of Kennedy's, had taken me to see the President-elect on the day before the inauguration to discuss television and the Presidency. It was really a selling expedition to convince the President that in addition to the use of television for news conferences and so-called fireside chats, he ought to consider the interview technique employed in the annual (Walter) Lippmann conversations he had seen and enjoyed as a senator. The President-elect told us that he would give the matter serious thought and asked us to bring the idea up again in six months.

Our first Eisenhower interview had just been completed when Clark and I went to the White House the next time. We were received in the Chief Executive's private quarters, where his valet was trimming the President's hair, and I can still remember the expression on his face when Blair suggested a dialogue with his predecessor. I won't try to quote the President, but in effect he said forcefully that he had no appetite for the proposal. The idea of a young President only a few months in office sitting down with an extraordinarily popular seventy-year-old ex-Chief Executive, with all the obvious comparisons of age, experience and wisdom, didn't appeal to him at all. He didn't think it would be good television, and he certainly didn't think it would be good for President Kennedy. However, he did agree to consider it, and he made a point of asking whether President Eisenhower was interested.

When I went to Gettysburg a few days later, I made a similar proposition to Mr. Eisenhower. His answer was just as quick and negative, and for the very opposite reasons: the General mentioned youth, the prestige of a President in office, and all the facts and figures at an active President's command. I never had the courage to tell either man the other's reaction, but I have often thought that their common instinct about what was right for their own image-though of course neither used that phrase-was one of the attributes that made each of them successful politicians.

I renewed my quest for such a dialogue years later, this time between President Johnson and General Eisenhower. Although there is considerable mutual respect between them, going back to the days when Eisenhower was in the White House and Johnson was Majority Leader in a Democratic Senate, I never had a word of encouragement from either of them.

In 1962, having given up on the idea of Presidential dialogues, we and the other two networks managed to convince President Kennedy that a television conversation was a worthwhile undertaking. Lippmann and others had been writing pieces about the President's lack of communication with the people, even suggesting that he had not yet learned the full use of television. Clark and I wrote the President and (Pierre) Salinger a series of letters on the subject, and finally, in December 1962, Pierre called to say that the Chief Executive had decided to do a one-hour conversation before Christmas. He quickly added that it was to be a three-network affair, but that the President had asked that CBS and I produce the program, and that the White House correspondents of the three networks ask the questions. Salinger cautioned me not to mention the idea to the other networks - there had to be a meeting at the management level-but that I could count on doing the program. A few days later the meeting was held, and the taping was set for December 16.

On that day, for almost two hours, a President of the United States used television better than it had ever been used before. But that afternoon also turned out to be the occasion of an embarrassing CBS domestic argument on how such interviews should be conducted.

The core of the problem was, I suppose, Stanton's 1959 statement that caused the flap with Murrow, and just how literal an interpretation should be placed on the phrase about programs being "exactly what it purports to be." I subscribed then, and I still do, to Stanton's ideal in theory, but having been involved in interviews with a series of such reluctant statesmen as Truman, Eisenhower, Chou En-lai, and (Harold) Macmillan, I know that a truer portrait of such men can best be captured by not imposing any time limitation, and then editing the footage to proper air length. A live interview with a man in office usually results in a *Face the Nation-Meet the Press* verbal fencing bout, in which a wary but nimble politician spends the half-hour trying to prevent his interrogators from getting him to put his foot in his mouth. Some important news breaks have come out of such panel shows, but the essence of the public official seldom emerges as it does in a distilled, carefully edited tape or film interview.

Before each "conversation" I would attempt to put the guest at ease by asking him to please relax and pretend that he was chatting with some old friends. I would also assure him that if he inadvertently revealed something that might endanger the national security, or made an incorrect statement, he had only to say so and we would make another take of his reply. Though I can't remember anyone ever exercising this option except to change a badly constructed sentence or an error of fact, it usually put the subject at ease. Particularly in the case of a President of the United States in office, it seems to me that this technique is essential, and I believe that most people in my position share this view.

On December 16, however, Salant and Clark told me that the management was reluctant to let us do the Kennedy interview in this fashion. I argued as persuasively as I could the case for a taped, edited interview-after all, these were the ground rules to which the President had agreed-and I finally won my case. I had also made it my business to confer with Jim Hagerty, then head of ABC News, and Bill McAndrew, chief of NBC News, and we were in complete agreement about how the interview should be conducted.

The timing of the program was nearly perfect. President Kennedy's second year in office was coming to a close, and the Cuban missile crisis had just ended. The three correspondents - George Herman, Sandy Vanocur and Bill Lawrence - had all done their homework, and so had the President. Don Hewitt turned Mr. Kennedy's office into a television set, with two of the five special cameras focused on the Chief Executive from an extremely close range, yet concealed in an alcove so that he was almost oblivious of them. The President wanted to sit in his big leather desk chair, but from past experience we knew that its swivel had a chronic squeak in it, and we prevailed on him to use his rocking chair.

A few hours before the interview began, I suggested to Mr. Kennedy that we divide the broadcast into two sections - "The President and the World" and "The President and the United States" - and that we spend approximately forty minutes on each. When I thought the time had come to move from one to the other, I would suggest a ten-minute break. He had not been told any of the questions, but he was aware of the general areas we intended to cover.

"A Conversation with the President" began without fanfare or special announcement. After one false start in response to the first question, the conversation took off and didn't stop until fifty-five minutes later. We had made the transition on cue from foreign to domestic issues after approximately forty minutes, but no one had wanted to interrupt that flow and grace of language because we were all enthralled. The President was enjoying the three correspondents and was responding as though no cameras were present; when I finally called a temporary halt he was astounded that nearly an hour had passed.

Mr. Kennedy then invited everyone into the Cabinet Room for coffee; and I ducked out to our mobile truck on the White House lawn to look at the video tape. Just as Hewitt and I were congratulating each other on the quality of the tape, one of the technicians handed me a phone. It was Blair Clark in New York, and he began by telling me how well the interview was going—he had been watching it on a monitor in his office—but that he thought we had more than enough material and should stop shooting. When I protested that there was a three-network agreement to shoot ninety minutes and then edit, he said that in his and Salant's opinion, we had everything we needed. I pointed out that we still had some important ground to cover—integration and the University of Mississippi dispute, education, and a final summary of the past year—and that I had no intention of cutting the session short.

After I hung up on Blair I had a thirty-second walk across the White House lawn to cool off, but when I walked into his office, I faced an intuitive President. "What's the matter, Fred," he said, "you got problems with your brass?" At that moment I had no idea how much of the brass was watching and listening in New York, but I answered, "Mr. President, if I'm going to lose my job, this is as good a place as the next one. Let us proceed."

The next twenty minutes provided some of the high points of the program. The President talked about the Meredith case and civil rights laws, about education, and about the satisfactions and disappointments of his months in office. But the most poignant moments came at the very end when the young President, scarred by the Bay of Pigs fiasco, heartened by the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis, leaned back and said reflectively: "I must say that I have a good deal of hope for the United States just because . . . this country . . . criticizes itself and is criticized around the world. One hundred and eighty million people for . . . almost twenty years have been the great means of defending . . . the world against the Nazi threat, and since then against the Communist threat . . . If weren't for us the Communists would be dominant in the world today, and because of us we're in a strong position. Now, I think that's a pretty good record for a country with six percent of the world's population . . . I think we ought to be rather pleased with ourselves this Christmas."

No one spoke for three or four seconds, and then it was over. The President stayed on for a few minutes afterward to look at the tape with us, and just as we were leaving hurriedly for the airport to catch the plane back to New York, he smiled at me and said, "Let me know if you need a job tomorrow."



JKF addresses audience in Dallas on Nov 22, 1963. Note the expression on LBJ's face; with Texas Governor John Connally behind him and Senator Ralph Yarborough on the left.

By the time Hewitt and I got to New York, a three-network team had edited the audio tape. I had a few minor suggestions, and we all stayed through the night. Editors worked all day Monday to make the transitions smooth; by late that afternoon copies had been made for each of the three networks, and recordings for the many foreign broadcast companies who wanted to broadcast it the next day.

"A Conversation with the President" was carried on Monday evening, December 17, on all three networks. When Salant called to congratulate me on the broadcast that evening, I told him that I was going to see Stanton the next day to complain about the outrageous interference at the White House in the middle of the interview. In the endurance test of completing such a broadcast, there is no time to look backward, but now that it was over I wanted to protest the sudden change in midstream.

When I saw Stanton he was as calm as I was indigent, and listened attentively to my complaints about Clark and Salant. I couldn't work under such circumstances, I said, and I angrily threatened to resign. Stanton puffed away at his pipe, said he understood why I was upset, agreed that the last part of the interview had been well worth doing and gave me the impression that nothing like this would ever happen again.

Neither Salant nor Clark nor I ever discussed the subject at the time, but much later, when I was in Salant's job and carrying out orders which I didn't always approve of, I asked one of the two

about that disagreement, "Was that your idea, or did it come from-?" Before I could finish, the answer was forthcoming: "I've been waiting three years for you to ask me that question."

Fifteen months after the first "Conversation with the President" there was another, but a new Chief Executive was in the chair, which now carried a small silver engraving on its leather back: "THE PRESIDENT, November 22, 1963." The opening camera shot slowly dollied back from that tight close-up to a room that had remained much the same. Bill Lawrence was there again, joined this time by David Brinkley and Eric Sevareid. During the briefing before taping began, I brought up the Bobby Baker case to the President.