MARVIN KALB: Hello, and welcome to The National Press Club and to another edition of The Kalb Report. I'm Marvin Kalb, and our subject tonight, The Twilight of Network News: A Conversation with Ted Koppel about Democracy and the Press. I use the word ‘twilight’ to suggest that network news, as we've known it, is on its way out and something new is emerging. Whether what's new will satisfy the urgent needs of our democracy cannot be known at this time. Let's hope that it will, because without a free, inquisitive, occasionally rambunctious media, we will not be living in an open society. A free press and open society are intimately linked, one dependent on the other. If network news is in its twilight, then perhaps our democracy is facing a turning point as well.

I've asked an old colleague and friend, Ted Koppel, to help us understand the changes in network news and what those changes might mean for our society. Ted is known best for his 25 years as anchor and host ofNightline, but he’s also been a foreign correspondent, a war correspondent, an author and he’s covered many political campaigns.

I share something with you now. In preparing for this program, I ran into the following interesting thought. Ted joined ABC News in 1963. I joined CBS in 1957. If my arithmetic is right, together we represent more than 100 years of journalistic experience. I mean, that's enough to depress anybody. So Ted, what in God’s name have we learned about our sacred craft of journalism in all of these years?

TED KOPPEL: Well, I think we've learned not to make predictions.

MARVIN KALB: So what are you predicting?

TED KOPPEL: I predict that your title, provocative as it may be, may be premature. I think that when Americans finally realize how bad things are, and what terrible straits our
political system is in, I think there may be a resurgence of the kind of journalism that you and I grew up with.

**MARVIN KALB:** That's a marvelous, very optimistic thought.

**TED KOPPEL:** Well actually no, it’s a terrible thought because it suggests the ship of state is almost going to have to sink before people are willing to jump back into the lifeboats again.

**MARVIN KALB:** Yeah, but do you think that we can truly even define journalism? I mean, if somebody walked into the room right now and came from Mars and said, “What are these guys talking about?” And you said, “Journalism,” explain it to that guy.

**TED KOPPEL:** Well, I guess the simplest way to explain it is to take it back to when you and I were young and when you and I began in this business. And for a moment, I'll limit it to broadcast journalism. When you and I were young, there were three networks. If you wanted to be seen and heard on national television, you had to do it on ABC, NBC or CBS. When I was in Vietnam in the late 1960s, mid ‘60s, late ‘60s, if I did a piece out in the field, it would be three days sometimes before that piece got on the air. It meant that you prepared your stories with more of a sense of context. You prepared your stories knowing that they had to survive. Two days, three days, sometimes even more than that.

I have nothing but respect, admiration, and a little bit of sympathy for our colleagues today who quite literally have to report almost around the clock.

**MARVIN KALB:** Live.
TED KOPPEL: Live. And whether they're working for television or radio or a newspaper, they're going to have to file for the blog, they're going to have to Tweet, they're going to have to do their little Facebook number. The only thing I never see on those schedules for which adequate time has been left--

MARVIN KALB: Sleep?

TED KOPPEL: --is reporting. [laughter] I sometimes wonder how they find the time to actually gather the material. But, it's all there. We have more media available to us today, more means of communicating information than have ever existed in the history of the world. We're so enchanted, though, with our ability to be fast that I think we've sometimes lost connection with what we're saying and why.

MARVIN KALB: I want to pursue that, but I want to ask you first, why did you even get into this business?

TED KOPPEL: Oh, I got into it probably for much the same reason you did. Now, that's unfair because what I'm going to say is I don't think I would have been terribly good at anything else. [laughter] I was born and spent the first 13 years of my life in England. My father listened to the BBC during World War II. I was just a little tyke in those days, but I still remember, at least my memory may be playing tricks on me, but I think I still remember hearing Edward R. Murrow's reports being rebroadcast on the BBC. And I swear that from earliest childhood on, all I ever wanted to do and be was a journalist, preferably as close to Edward R. Murrow as I could make it. Which probably isn't too far from what inspired you.

MARVIN KALB: Not too far at all. Murrow, I did a piece for the New York Times Magazine section on soviet youth, I think in the spring of 1957. And Murrow read it,
liked it, called me and said, “Can you come down and talk to me about soviet youth?” He was extremely curious about everything. And, of course, I went down to talk to him and his secretary said as I went in, “You've got 30 minutes. That's it, max.” I said, “It’s okay with me.” Three hours later, she came in and said, “I think, Ed, you've got other events today.” But he used to get so absorbed in these things that I had listened to him earlier and then met him and was completely bowled over. This was a great journalist and he was really interested in the things that I was interested in.

**TED KOPPEL:** Well, and if you look back at the men-- I don't think he hired many women, did he, back in those days?

**MARVIN KALB:** There were a couple of women who were part of the World War II contingent at CBS, but they did not last. After the war, they went off for different reasons.

**TED KOPPEL:** But the point I was going to make, whether it was an Eric Sevareid or a Howard K. Smith, the people that Ed Murrow hired were people of substance; historians, writers, readers, people who cared about history. And sometimes, when I look at what passes for news on cable television especially these days, I wonder where they find these people.

[laughter]

**MARVIN KALB:** Well, he did care a great deal. He cared a great deal about writing. And one of the points you were making earlier about some things that you wanted to last for three, four, five days before would actually get on the air, it had to be written and written well. Murrow cared a great deal about style and the way in which you presented information. It was always, for me--
TED KOPPEL: Interesting for--

MARVIN KALB: Please?

TED KOPPEL: I'm just going to interrupt you for a second. Take a look at how often when you're watching something being covered on cable television these days, and it requires great skill. I'm not denigrating it in any fashion. But notice how often what you're hearing is just whatever comes off the top of the head of the man or woman who is reporting. Take note of how rare it is for a script actually to be written. Now, you know, if you only have a couple of minutes to report something, there really is some skill required. I mean, the essence of journalism, after all, lies not simply in the reporting but in the separating the wheat from the chaff; in the editing, in determining why one thing is important to a story and another is not. In putting it into some kind of context, occasionally even historical context. Folks are pretty good at ad libbing, but that takes more skill than most people have.

MARVIN KALB: Absolutely, and you've taken us from what was-- and you've raised the lid just a little bit on what is-- in journalism today, what has changed? Tick off the major changes?

TED KOPPEL: Since you and I began?

MARVIN KALB: Yeah?

TED KOPPEL: Well, first of all, it is the biggest change, I always argue, came about in 1968. Now, 1968, you have to understand, was an extraordinary year. 1968 was the year of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. It was the year that Lyndon Johnson stepped down and
said he wouldn’t run for President again, the year that Martin Luther King was assassinated, the year that Bobby Kennedy was assassinated, the year of the riots of the Democratic convention in Chicago.

So, it's not too surprising that we may not pay as much attention as we should to the birth of a new form of television news. The television news magazine began in 1968 called, as you know, 60 Minutes. And 60 Minutes has done an extraordinary job over these last 44, 45 years.

MARVIN KALB: They’ve done amazing work.

TED KOPPEL: Amazing work. But it also did something that no television news program had ever done before. It made money. It turned a profit. And that--

MARVIN KALB: To be clear about that, up to that point?

TED KOPPEL: If it happened, it was rarely spoken of.

MARVIN KALB: It was a rare thing.

TED KOPPEL: Yes.

MARVIN KALB: And we were, for the most part, a loss leader. Television news did not make money.

TED KOPPEL: Well, tell folks what the famous-- it wasn't Frank Stanton, it was Bill Paley. Bill Paley, who came to you folks who were producers and journalists at CBS and said-- remember?
MARVIN KALB: Well, he used to call us the jewels in his crown.

TED KOPPEL: Well, he also said, “Don’t worry about making money. I've got Jack Benny.”

MARVIN KALB: “Jack Benny to make money for me.” That's right. “You guys don’t worry about that.” And what that meant was that when we went out to do a story, we were totally absorbed in the story, we weren't worried about how much money it would take to cover the story. We just did it. Even as late as 1980, I remember being able to charter a plane from Rome to Istanbul because you thought you might be able to get an interview with somebody important for your piece. We didn’t have to check with New York at all. But now?

TED KOPPEL: Now, profit. We have become profit centers at the networks, and with the cable stations also. Being a profit center is a huge responsibility because it means that you start thinking in a different way. You start thinking not so much about what the public ought to hear, but rather what the public wants to hear. You are now in competition with the other networks, with the other news outlets, not just for audience, but you're in competition with them to make money. And the way you make money is-- I'll give you a for instance.

I may be doing my former colleagues at ABC an injustice, but I seem to recall that the last one hour documentary that played in prime time was on the subject of Charlie Sheen and his carousing, womanizing, all the other good things that he was doing which were clearly of enormous interest to all of you because that's why they put it on the air. It got a big audience.
MARVIN KALB: This idea of the difference between need to know and ought to know? Spell that out a little bit.

TED KOPPEL: When once you worry about is making money, you try to focus on those things that are, A, most likely to attract an audience; and B, least likely to cost a great deal of money. So the first thing you do-- I remember many years ago getting a call from my old friend and colleague, Peter Jennings. And Peter said, “Ted, have the bean counters been in touch with you?” And I said, “As a matter of fact, I just got off the phone with them.” And what the bean counters wanted to know from him and from me was, “Ted, how many times in a year does Nightline use the Moscow bureau?”” And they had asked Peter Jennings the same question, “How many times a year does World News Tonight use the Moscow bureau?” And they asked the same thing of the anchor or the producer of 20/20 and Good Morning, America, and then they did a simple calculus.

So the Moscow bureau cost, let’s say, $2 million a year and among all the ABC programs, it was used, let’s say, 50 times a year. Fifty into two million? $40,000 a report? Wow. Close down the Moscow bureau. And what happened with the Moscow bureau at ABC has happened, for the most part, at NBC, at CBS, at ABC. Most of the overseas bureaus now are essentially just mail drops where you may have some local employee keeping the office open, and when something really big happens in Cairo, when something really big happens in Mexico City, in Beijing, in Hong Kong, what you do is you ship in one of the star correspondents, or even an anchor.

But the difference between covering the news year after year after year in a country, maybe even learning the language, certainly getting to know the people, getting to know who the movers and shakers are, and what the political dynamic in that country is, that really is not happening much anymore. And parenthetically, what's happening in our
business is also happening over in the intelligence gathering field at the CIA where quite literally--

MARVIN KALB: I don’t want to go too far.

TED KOPPEL: Go ahead?

MARVIN KALB: I want to go too far there. We’re libel to end up-- [laughter] I want to talk to you a little bit about the role of cable television, which you touched on before. In a recent interview with Bill O’Reilly of Fox, you derided ideological coverage of the news, bad for America, you said, making it difficult, if not impossible, for Congress to reach across the aisle and find compromise. You also wrote in an op ed piece, “This is not good for the republic.” What do you mean?

TED KOPPEL: What I mean, and this goes back, it’s really a continuation of the same theme. I mean, first of all, in addition to demonstrating that network news divisions could make money, there was a technological explosion. It wasn't just the three networks anymore; now you had cable, you had satellite television, you had the internet. So now there are quite literally hundreds, even thousands of competitors out there. What is incredibly cheap to put on the air is a couple of people like you and me just yelling at each other, right?

MARVIN KALB: Talk.

TED KOPPEL: Right? Talking. What draws an audience is when, in fact, we disagree. When, in fact, we get nasty with one another. And what Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes demonstrated 15 years ago is there really was a hunger in America for something that was less liberal than what the networks were putting on the air. And so Fox News was
born and Fox News has been hugely successful, earns somewhere between 1 and 1 ½ billion dollars a year.

Now, my current employers, the folks over at NBC, had their own cable network, MSNBC, wasn’t doing very well, wasn't making any money. And they took a look at what Fox had done and they said, “Whoa. If they can make a billion and a half dollars a year doing news that skews to the right, if we only make half of that, that’s still $750 million a year. Let’s skew to the left.” And so you have on cable television news that caters to people who consider themselves progressives, news that caters to people who consider themselves to be conservatives. You have the afternoon radio talk shows, the evening radio talk shows, which cater largely to the conservative. You have the late night comedy shows, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Bill Maher, that tend to cater more to the left.

And the end result is that the area that has gone more or less fallow is serious news organizations reporting the important events of the day without any kind of political bias. We have grown up as a nation now believing that we are entitled to hear views that essentially resonate to the views we already hold. And the end result of that becomes, and we have seen it this year with a lot of distinguished Senators, Congress people, leaving because they're Olympia Snow, left the Senate because she simply can't handle the nastiness anymore. And there's an awful lot of that. And you cannot, in a democracy--

**MARVIN KALB:** You made the point.

**TED KOPPEL:** Let me just finish this one line, Marvin. You cannot in a democracy expect people to be able to reach across the aisles and make the accommodations for important issues if they are terrified that in so doing, they're going to expose themselves
to the wrath of either the right or the left, either Jon Stewart’s humor or Rush Limbaugh’s sharp tongue.

**MARVIN KALB:** So what you said not too long ago was that the commercial success of both Fox and MSNBC has become a source of nonpartisan sadness for you?

**TED KOPPEL:** Absolutely.

**MARVIN KALB:** Meaning what?

**TED KOPPEL:** Meaning that all of-- you and I have known for many, many years that we operated in a business. But as we were saying a few minutes ago, that business used to make all of its money with *I Love Lucy* and Jack Benny and *77 Sunset Strip* and whatever else was hot back in the ‘60s and ‘70s. Made so much money on those programs that they could afford to spend 20, 30, 40, 50 million dollars a year covering the world. That is no longer the case. And that's dangerous.

**MARVIN KALB:** You know, my sense every now and then, Ted, is that though there are good journalists in cable television, the whole package of cable television, when it is presented to the American people, tends to debase just about anything it touches. That doesn’t mean that every conversation is bad, but it does mean that the package to me comes through as a negative, as something that makes fun of people, that is overly critical, that is not real.

**TED KOPPEL:** Look, Fareed Zakaria does a program on Sunday mornings called GPS. First rate television journalism. Fareed is a very smart man. He invites very smart people on his program and they talk about important issues in a smart way. I doubt that he has 200,000 people watching that show. That's probably a fairly big audience if he gets that
many. It’s on a Sunday morning, which is when programs like that still survive to one degree or another. But you’re never going to see that program in prime time during the week. Never.

MARVIN KALB: In your judgment, since cable television is the place where you're going to get right, left, political conversation and CNN living in the middle so awkwardly and trying desperately to keep its base, is it doing good things for our democracy, in your view?

TED KOPPEL: No, of course not. Is who doing good things?

MARVIN KALB: The whole idea of cable television?

TED KOPPEL: No.

MARVIN KALB: I mean, I feel quite often that if you eliminate MSNBC, Fox for which I do occasional commentary, and CNN, it would probably improve American democracy overnight. Things would simply miraculously get better. People would talk to one another again rather than engage in an artificial fight which is what most of what cable television ends up being.

TED KOPPEL: Look, you take someone like Rachel Maddow, for example, Rachel is--

MARVIN KALB: Very bright, very bright.

TED KOPPEL: I was about to make the point. Rachel Maddow is a very smart woman, very smart and could very easily in the old days, and should today, I'd love to see Rachel Maddow as the anchor of one of the evening news programs on network television. But,
the price of that would be that she would have to keep her opinions to herself. It is her opinions that draw the viewership on MSNBC. Now, she's a very bright woman, as I said. But I don’t want to know what she thinks about these issues, I really don’t. I want to hear her informed reporting. I want to hear her interview people with that sharp mind of hers. I don’t want to know where she comes down on a particular issue. But that is seen as hopelessly old fashioned these days.

MARVIN KALB: I was about to say, “Ted, God.”

TED KOPPEL: Those days are over.

MARVIN KALB: As a matter of fact, excuse me for a minute, I just want to take a minute now to remind our radio and television audiences that this is The Kalb Report. I'm Marvin Kalb, our guest today is Ted Koppel. Our subject, The Twilight of Network News. Ted, you have described the good old days of journalism, I love this phrase, as an imperfect, untidy little Eden of journalism. You then went on to say that these days, broadcast news has been outflanked, overtaken by scores of other media options. Help us understand the need, the perceived need for these changes? Because they not only affect the quality of network news-- by the way, do you agree with me that it’s in a twilight zone now?

TED KOPPEL: It is in a twilight. But remember, twilight is usually followed by night and then dawn follows night. So, I'm still hopeful. I'm still hopeful. It’s not going to stay this way forever. I think what tends to happen in this country, Marvin, as you and I have observed over the last 50 or 60 years politically, we tend to go too far to the right, and then we correct course and we pass through the middle and then we go too far to the left and then we correct course again. I think what's happened to broadcast journalism requires a course correction. And as we come to realize that our educational system is not
as good as we like to believe, that our healthcare system is not as good as we like to believe, that we are spending-- I mean, there are so many things that are on the brink of taking us into real disaster, not the least of them being the possibility of cyber warfare. I mean, that's something that television news ought to be covering big time right now.

MARVIN KALB: Big time.

TED KOPPEL: I am tremendously concerned by the fact that the American public and its military have never been as far apart as they are right now. We know nothing-- I mean, yeah we do a terrific job of calling everyone in uniform a hero, we do a terrific job of welcoming them at airports saying, “Thank you for your service.” We know nothing about what's going on in the military. And what's more, the military and military operations these days are being launched on the basis of drone attacks, CIA operatives, special operations forces out in the field, and all of that backed by civilian employees, civilian contractors, and we know next to nothing about what is being done by any of these groups.

MARVIN KALB: Because the reporting is not being done?

TED KOPPEL: Well, I mean look, it’s because we have found that keeping-- that, A, the American public won't stand for a draft. That B, the professional military was not enough to fight all over the world, as we are now finding. I mean, we've been focused on Iraq, we've been focused on Afghanistan. We actually believe that all the troops are coming back from Afghanistan. I'll tell you here and now, that's not going to happen. We will still have U.S. troops in Afghanistan a year from now, two years from now, five years from now. Where's the press?

MARVIN KALB: Where is it?
TED KOPPEL: Well, obviously these are not issues that the people who run our news programs today--

MARVIN KALB: Why not?

TED KOPPEL: Because they don’t draw an audience. What draws an audience is Charlie Sheen. What draws an audience is people yelling at each other. You know, it’s not enough to say these issues are important. I know it sounds totally idealistic, but when you and I became journalists as young men, we actually believed that we were entering, really, a special chosen profession that meant something to a democracy, that--

MARVIN KALB: You called it a calling.

TED KOPPEL: A calling, exactly. And when you got into it and when I got into it, I was tremendously fortunate and ended up making a lot of money later on. Word of honor, I never thought I was going to get rich as a journalist. You didn’t go into journalism, you don’t go into journalism, to become wealthy.

MARVIN KALB: The changes that we're talking about, you've already touched on this, the effect it has on our society, on the business itself. On journalism itself, value systems change. I'm not saying that we can ever return to the good old days, that's gone, that's done. But what worries me is whether we can take the value systems of old and try to see them preserved in the digital environment of today. Do you think that's possible?

TED KOPPEL: Well, I not only think it’s possible. I mean, you and I are, in a sense, we need a third person here half our age telling what is being accomplished in the digital arena.
MARVIN KALB: But what do you think is being accomplished?

TED KOPPEL: I think that there are people who are doing-- what was the word I told you before that's-- we're both having a senior moment. When two guys at the same time--

MARVIN KALB: Speak for yourself, will you?

TED KOPPEL: --have a senior moment, it’s really bad. What's the word I'm looking for, people who, in effect, look at all the blog sites and--

MARVIN KALB: Curators.

TED KOPPEL: Curators, thank you.

MARVIN KALB: I, you'll notice, did not--

[laughter]

TED KOPPEL: Well done. There are curators today who because there are so many hundreds, so many thousands of websites, make it a point of saying, “Look, if you really want to know what's good in the area, I mean what's interesting in the area of foreign policy or, let's say Persian Gulf, or let’s say the environment, or let’s say cyber warfare, e can lead you in the right direction.” And the technology is there so that you and I can gather material, gather information, in a fashion that is infinitely easier than the one we used to use 40 years ago, 50 years ago. We can sit at our laptop right now and we can harvest information.
MARVIN KALB: Where's the reporting? I mean, you're getting a ton of information. These curators can provide any amount of information, but how reliable is the information?

TED KOPPEL: Exactly.

MARVIN KALB: Is it based upon actual reporting?

TED KOPPEL: Look, I think two key points have to be made. A, there is brilliant material out there that is being well reported according to standards that you and I would envy.

MARVIN KALB: How do you know that?

TED KOPPEL: Because I've been told. On the other hand, the implication of your question is absolutely correct. We don't know, often. When something comes across on the internet, we have no way of knowing what its provenance is, we have no way of knowing what the intention, what the goals, what the biases of the people who are putting that out there. And, I'll tell you something that I learned the other day from one of these Ted Talks. I don't know if you're familiar, it has nothing to do with me, these Ted Talks. And it was on the subject of Google. And the speaker was making the point that he is what would be called a progressive. And he said a friend of his who is very conservative, they took their respective laptops, their computers, and they simply typed into the search engine the word Egypt. And they got totally different responses. Why? Because there is that process going on, every time that we search for something on our laptop, we are not only gathering information, we are giving information. We are giving information about what we buy, about what we find interesting, about what we like, about perhaps what our political biases may be, so that in theory, a search engine that ought to be giving the
objective information and you and I ought to get the same information if we type in the same word. Not so anymore. That's kind of scary.

**MARVIN KALB:** Because somebody is making up his or her mind as to what it is that we want?

**TED KOPPEL:** It's not somebody, it is a series of Os and 1s. It is a series of-- it is the computer, what is the word I'm looking for? Algorithm, thank you. It is the algorithm.

**MARVIN KALB:** The algorithm is fine, and I understand that it exists and I respect it and I will salute it. It’s there. But I want to know what all of that has to do with journalism. Who gets up in the morning and covers something? Who’s going to go out and cover a war? Who’s going to go out and cover a campaign? Without the journalist being there doing the ABCs of information gathering, honest information gathering, all of this other stuff is baloney, Ted.

**TED KOPPEL:** I mean, look, there are plenty of people who are going to be out there doing the gathering. But the key word--

**MARVIN KALB:** In fact, let me interrupt. That's not true. In the coverage of war today, there were fewer reporters covering the war in Afghanistan now than there's ever been, fewer. When you went in in the Iraq War--

**TED KOPPEL:** Fewer American reporters.

**MARVIN KALB:** Americans and others as well.
TED KOPPEL: Well, look, I frequently of an evening now will watch the BBC or Al-Jazeera because particularly when things are going on in the Middle East, I'm going to learn more from the folks out there who actually speak Arabic and know the area and know the region.

MARVIN KALB: But do we know that they are reporters? We know they speak Arabic.

TED KOPPEL: We know that they are reporters. Do we know that they are objective reporters? That's a different question.

MARVIN KALB: Okay, well do we know that? We don’t.

TED KOPPEL: We don’t. But the fact of the matter is we've almost given up on objective reporters in our own country.

MARVIN KALB: That's my question, Ted.

TED KOPPEL: It is still possible, and you and I do it every day, to pick up the New York Times to listen to NPR, to pick up the Wall Street Journal, to watch the News Hour. The outlets are there. We have to look a little-- our old friend, Jim Lehrer, used to say, “We're the program that dares to be dull.” And I once said to Jim, “Sometimes, my friend, I think you're a little too daring.” [laughter] But, it’s there. There is still good journalism being committed. The good journalists can't help it if the public in droves seems to be moving in other directions. I'm simply making the point, and I don't know whether I'm wishing for this to happen because, as I say, I think it’ll only happen when people realize how devastating the consequences are of not having objective journalists out there.
MARVIN KALB: Ted, do you know Clark Kent?

TED KOPPEL: Know him well. We have on occasion used the same phone booth.

[laughter]

MARVIN KALB: Clark Kent is no longer a reporter for The Daily Planet.

TED KOPPEL: What does he do now?

MARVIN KALB: He's a blogger. I mean, if you pick up--

TED KOPPEL: Where does he change?

[laughter]

MARVIN KALB: Probably in the curator’s kitchen, someplace like that. But that is an indication to me of how profoundly the journalism of years ago to today. I'm not saying that there isn't journalism today, I'm saying that it’s so much more difficult to find and the areas that you will go out to try to find it are not terribly reliable. And I'd like to think about sort of a north star of journalism today. When you started, you had somebody like Roone Arledge at ABC who did extraordinary things at that network, including starting Nightline. I mean, with me, it was Ed Murrow and a lot of other people at CBS. But who are the Arledges and the Murrows of today in today’s world?

TED KOPPEL: Look, the fact of the matter is when Roone Arledge came on, he had been the president of ABC Sports and we at ABC News were terrified that this guy who came in wearing his jungle suit and his red-- I mean his golden bracelets that he wore,
and he was not one of the champions of great journalism when he came on. He became that. He evolved, and he evolved in some large measure because he ran up against immovable objects like Howard K. Smith and Frank Reynolds and people who still believed that good journalism was important. And nobody--

MARVIN KALB: And he turned, he recognized the good journalism and moved toward it.

TED KOPPEL: Well, he recognized it, but look, I'll tell you the back story of Nightline. For about a year before the Iran hostage crisis, Roone Arledge came to us in the news division and said, “Any time something of real major importance happens, I want to do a late night special on it, 11:30. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes, I don't care.” He was trying to-- he initially wanted to get a one hour newscast on at the dinner hour, at 6:30. The affiliated stations around the country would not go along. So Roone decided that he was going to seize that time period. And by the time we got to the Iran hostage crisis, after about the fifth day, the sixth day, the seventh day, we were running out of things to say, we were running out of things to report. And Roone said to us, “I don't care. Tell me what the difference is between a Sunni and a Shiite. Tell me about the Shah and how he came to power. Tell me-- I don't care what.” He kept that program going because he recognized that there was a tremendous American appetite for this story. Had it not been for that appetite, Nightline would never have been born.

MARVIN KALB: And also, you were at ABC which did not have a very important program in that time slot.

TED KOPPEL: That's correct. In other words--

MARVIN KALB: You didn’t have a Tonight Show, for example.
TED KOPPEL: Or a Letterman show.

MARVIN KALB: Or the Letterman show, something like that.

TED KOPPEL: But I'll tell you something, and one of the things that has changed enormously. When Nightline began in March of 1980, you didn’t have the Letterman show yet on CBS. They would rerun some old cop drama. But among the three programs, The Tonight Show, the cop drama and Nightline, we had 70 percent of all the homes watching television at 11:30 at night.

MARVIN KALB: Really?

TED KOPPEL: Seventy percent. These days, The Tonight Show, Nightline, and the Letterman show are lucky to have 25 percent. That's what's happened because what you didn’t have 35 years ago was cable, satellite, the internet. And all of those things have diluted the importance and the reach of the networks.

MARVIN KALB: So maybe twilight is too soft a word?

TED KOPPEL: No, because you still have-- I mean, even though it’s only 25 percent, the evening newscasts, for example, among the three of them I suspect they still have between 15 and 20 million viewers every night.

MARVIN KALB: More than that, 20 to 25 million.

TED KOPPEL: Twenty to twenty-five million. When you and I were reporting from the State Department--
MARVIN KALB: It was more than that.

TED KOPPEL: It was 40 million, 50 million. I think Cronkite alone probably had about 20 million people.

MARVIN KALB: Every night. No, that certainly is true. The responsibilities of journalism to democracy and to our society, I want you to talk about that a little bit more. I want you to explain to me why there is this connection between the flow of news and a vibrant society?

TED KOPPEL: Look, if the American public, the voting public, is ignorant of the issues, is uninformed, how can it make intelligent decisions about whom to pick? It's bad enough that the citizens united decision of the Supreme Court has now resulted in, I think the New York Times the other day said, that the amount of money that was spent on all the election campaigns, all of them, $6 billion. Now, I was shocked by that. I moderated a discussion the other morning between Karl Rove and James Carville, and Rove’s reaction--

MARVIN KALB: How lucky can one guy be? [laughter]

TED KOPPEL: It was fascinating. But Mr. Rove made the point that we spend infinitely more than that on dog food.

MARVIN KALB: That's absurd.

TED KOPPEL: Yes, it is. It is. Because much as I have always loved our pets and love pets in general, the fact of the matter is if our elections end up being reduced to the
snarling and shouting and innuendo-- people keep saying, “Well, things were much worse in Jefferson’s time.” Yes, they were. But you only had broad sheets that were being distributed. You didn’t have everyone walking around with his or her own little communications device. Information now is spread so ubiquitously, is spread so quickly, so instantaneously, that if we don’t have reliable, trustworthy, objective sources of information, then our whole electoral structure is going to collapse of its own weight.

MARVIN KALB: You know, Ted, there was that CNN story during that awful Hurricane Sandy week about how the New York Stock Exchange was under three feet of water. Of course, it wasn’t true. Wasn’t true at all. CNN got that story not from one of its reporters, CNN got the story from an online message board on the National Weather Service’s website so they got a line, “Three feet of water, New York Stock Exchange,” and they put it out. I don’t want to pick on CNN because it could have been done by somebody else, too.

But that to me is one of the dangers in trying to retain a best standards, some practice, some place where you can turn and say, “This is the right way of doing things, and this is simply wrong.” And I have the impression these days, despite all of the good things that you have said about all of the curators and whatever, all of that stuff being said, I am left with an uneasy feeling that I don't know where all of the information is coming from. I don’t have a feeling that-- remember years ago when we knew every cameraman who was taking pictures of some big event in Cairo? We knew exactly. Joe Masraff of CBS was taking that picture and you knew that it was an objective look at what was happening at that time. I don't have any feel for that at all today. I don't know who’s taking the pictures. I don't know that they're even working for a network. They may be working for some small outfit hired by the network because the network doesn’t want to bring in its own cameraman, it’ll take too much.
TED KOPPEL: Couple of points. Number one, notice the number of times, if you watch more than one newscast in an evening, notice the number of times that you will see precisely the same video on all three networks when it comes from overseas, in large measure because the networks don’t have their own reporters, don’t have their own camera people over there anymore, and they have bought it all from the same single source.

Point number two: what is wrong, after all, with having a local reporter covering the event? The local reporter, after all, speaks the language, knows the people. Well, let’s say that local reporter is reporting from Tehran and that local reporter knows that if he or she makes a misstep in what he or she reports, they're going to be arrested, they're going to be thrown in jail. The American reporter may get thrown out of the country, but that's probably the worst thing that's going to happen.

And finally, I find there is absolutely no willingness on the part of critics to believe that objectivity in journalism is possible. And I keep hearing that, “How can you-- there's no such thing as absolute objectivity.” To which I say when you go to hire a lawyer, do you ask that lawyer, “Tell me, do you like me? I mean, do you really, really like me? Because if you don’t like me, you're not going to be able to put your heart into this thing.” You expect that lawyer to act as a professional.

When you go to see a doctor, you're not asking that doctor what his or her politics are. You simply want that doctor to deal with you on the basis of her best professional expertise. And whether or not our critics want to believe it, I argue and I think you'll agree with me, that there really was a time, and there really remain in this country today, men and women who can be professional journalists capable of objectivity. That doesn’t mean that they don’t go home at night and rail against the darkness. It doesn't mean that they don’t have favorites in an election. But it does mean-- I mean, to this day, you've
known my wife, Grace Anne, for many, many years. Grace Anne doesn’t know how I vote in an election.

**MARVIN KALB:** Really?

**TED KOPPEL:** I don’t tell her. I don't think it’s appropriate.

**MARVIN KALB:** Wow. And you're still married?

**TED KOPPEL:** Let me put it this way; she knows everything else about me. I think she can figure it out, but I've never told her.

**MARVIN KALB:** That's so interesting. What does that say? What does that really indicate?

**TED KOPPEL:** It indicates I have believed since I was a very young reporter that my personal opinions have no place in the reporting that I do.

**MARVIN KALB:** But when you talk to somebody like Bill O’Reilly, for example, who was my student many years ago, and I should have flunked him, Bill believes profoundly, deeply, that you're a biased guy. You're of the left. Why? Because you worked at ABC. I, he's given up on years ago, definitely of the left because I was at CBS. And I would say to him, “You haven't a clue as to how I vote.” He said, “Of course I know, everybody knows.” And that attitude has been accepted as a kind of truth.

**TED KOPPEL:** That’s what I'm saying.

**MARVIN KALB:** By so many people.
TED KOPPEL: Absolutely. And, you know, until we are prepared to accept the principle that objectivity, or at least a genuine effort toward objectivity in journalism is possible, we're going to be-- the late, great Daniel Patrick Moynihan used to say, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, not entitled to his own facts.” These days, we've turned that on its head. These days, we believe that everyone is indeed entitled to his own facts. You want right wing facts? We've got the factory for you. You want left wing facts? We've got the plant that'll put it out for you.

MARVIN KALB: So how can we make it clear to people that if they watch, for example, NBC Nightly News, the CBS Evening News, World News Tonight, there is a basic impulse there on the part of the anchor and the reporters to tell it straight. But cable is where you're getting the opinion. Cable says you're getting opinion also on the networks. So everybody is running around in a circle pointing fingers at everybody else saying, “You're as biased as everybody else, but you're not admitting it.”

TED KOPPEL: Look, I don't think it’s so much a matter of bias at the networks.

MARVIN KALB: I don't think so at all, I will agree.

TED KOPPEL: I really don’t. I think the problem with the networks these days is they're simply not putting the money into the kind of news coverage that is vital to a democracy.

MARVIN KALB: How would the money help?

TED KOPPEL: The money would help in that you would, for one thing, you would open up-- when has the world ever been, in your experience, a more dangerous place than
it is right now? I happen to believe that at the worst times of the Cold War, yes we went
to the brink of nuclear war with the Cuban missile crisis, but the fact of the matter is there
was a balance between the great powers. These days, we need information from the third
world more than we have ever needed it before. We don’t have the reporters out there.

MARVIN KALB: That's absolutely true. And I'm sorry to say at this particular time,
that we've run out of time.

TED KOPPEL: It happens.

MARVIN KALB: Which is the relentless clock, as relentless for older reporters. I think
the clock ought to pay a little more respect for people like us. But anyway, I want to
thank our wonderful audience here for being so polite and nice and being with us tonight.
And they have been able to see us in this magic of the internet. If they flick on right now,
they can actually see us, not just on cable, but they can see us through the internet all over
the world. It’s a magnificent thing. I want to thank our guest, Ted Koppel, for sharing his
time and insights with us. [applause]

Let me close with the following thought. We are all dazzled by the digital age, and
understandably so. The speed, the access, everything live, it's truly amazing. But every
now and then, I worry that we may be losing sight of the fact that this new technology is
only a tool. It’s a tool for the dissemination of what we as journalists have discovered. It
can never be considered more important than the content of what we have discovered.
Hourly daily broadcasts, a story that needs telling, a crime or a misdeed or a misjudgment
that needs exploring.

I look out and I ask you all, are there any new Edward R. Murrows in this audience? We
need you now more than ever to help sustain our democracy. Good, honest, bold,
unafraid, even on occasion rambunctious, outrageous journalism, is essential to democracy. Murrow once said, “This is no time for fear,” and he was right. So young Murrows, rise up. Rise up. Ted and I have done the best we can, now it’s your turn. Use these modern tools, but use them well because otherwise, as Murrow once said, “It’s all just lights and wires in a box.” So that's it for now. I'm Marvin Kalb, and quoting Murrow once again, good night and good luck. [applause]

As you've been warned, this is your time to ask questions. There are two microphones, I see one over there and one over here. If you get up to ask a question, that's going to be fine. Please identify yourself. And the idea is to ask a question, don’t make a speech because I'll cut you off, I'll be very nasty. Why don’t we start here on the right? Please, go ahead?

**CONNIE LAWN:** Hi, I'm Connie Lawn [?]. How are you doing, old friends? I remember our days in the State Department. Can you assess the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Is it fair, who’s doing the best job? And are the wars and the horrors in Africa, Asia, any less important because they don’t get coverage?

**TED KOPPEL:** Let me take the second half of that question first. There has been a war going on in Congo for well over ten years now. It has cost more than five million lives.

**MARVIN KALB:** Five million?

**TED KOPPEL:** Five million people who have died of starvation, disease, have been driven into the jungle, died there, people who've been killed in fighting. More than five million people. Barely covered. We have barely even noticed it. I mention that because journalism, like foreign policy, is frequently affected by national interest. To the degree that there is a perception that what happens in the Congo is less important to the United
States, we don’t cover it. We are infinitely more engaged right now in what's happening in Syria, but the coverage of what's happening in Syria, it's not bad, but I don't know that it shed a great deal of light. And part of the problem is even there, you were asking about- - I knew you began by asking about what's happening in Gaza right now, and what I think of the coverage of that. Did I hear you correctly?

CONNIE LAWN: Yes.

TED KOPPEL: Any time Israel is involved in a story, it becomes an excruciatingly difficult story for American journalists to cover because there is, for the most part a natural sympathy in this country, a sense of identity in this country, with Israelis. And many reporters, old friends and colleagues of mine, the late Peter Jennings, used to, I think, very unfairly be criticized for taking an anti-Israeli point of view. It wasn't so much an anti-Israeli point of view as that he had spent many years living in the Arab world and had a sympathetic point of view to Arabs.

I think what is happening in Gaza right now meets almost any definition of tragedy. The Israelis cannot be expected, on the one hand, to stand by while their cities are rocketed. On the other hand, the great irony, the paradox in that story, is because the IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces, are infinitely more professional than Hamas fighters, the number of casualties on the Palestinian side are always going to be much greater, thereby leaving an impression that there's somehow something unfair about the war.

This is precisely a time when you need correspondents who have spent years in the region because by and large, you asked me what I think of the coverage, I think it's surface. It focuses on the obvious, the casualties. You don’t hear much about the underlying causes or what the underlying possibilities may be for agreement between the two sides.
I think that's one of the things we have lost in not having resident correspondents who report from the region year after year after year.

**MARVIN KALB:** It’s interesting, just an additional point there, Ted, that a couple of nights ago, ABC *World News Tonight* had Christiane Amanpour in Jerusalem, she happened to be there doing another story when the Gaza story erupted. And anchor Diane Sawyer turned to her with a big intro, that “We have Christiane Amanpour there and she's going to give us the inside story.” But then they gave her about 45 seconds to do the inside story and she was, you could see it, she really couldn't get it out, it was very difficult. So that is, as yet, another dimension of trying to make everything bite sized even an analysis by a reporter who really does understand that story. It would have been wonderful to hear more from her. Yes, please?

**GIANCARLO GONZALEZ:** Good evening. My name is Giancarlo Gonzalez with Talk Radio News Service. You mentioned an interesting point before Mr. Kalb cut you off about our intelligence service.

**TED KOPPEL:** He does that all the time. [laughter]

**GIANCARLO GONZALEZ:** It was a moment where you were talking about how our intelligence services were maybe stretched too thin, I'm putting words in your mouth. But you were intimating that there because we were not only having a lack of journalists in different parts of the world, but we were also stretched--

**MARVIN KALB:** It was affecting the intelligence community as well.
GIANCARLO GONZALEZ: I wanted you to-- there was another question, but I thought you said something and I thought maybe I could give you that moment to expand on that because I thought that was really fascinating, considering how the American public tends to trust the demagoguery, the left or the right.

MARVIN KALB: But you do have a question, I assume?

GIANCARLO GONZALEZ: And the question is, Mr. Koppel, can you elaborate on that point?

TED KOPPEL: Yeah. The point I was going to make is that essentially, the same thing is happening within the intelligence community as is happening within the television news community; and that is, there is the perception that technology is an adequate replacement for human intelligence. There is the perception in television news that you can use the satellite, you can use a jet plane, you can get somebody in from anywhere on- - from the United States you can reach any part of the world in 18 hours or less, right? And by virtue of the satellite, you can report instantaneously. But that doesn't substitute for having a reporter who’s been on the ground for years.

The same thing is true for the same reasons in that the intelligence community is also suffering budgetary cuts and people are being told, “Look, we can get the same kind of information with electronic intercepts, with satellite reconnaissance, with technology, in other words,” when in point of fact, having a human agent on the ground gives you a depth, a third dimension, that you cannot get from the technology alone.

MARVIN KALB: Yes, please?
ANNE O'LEARY: Hi, I'm Anne O'Leary, a retired foreign service officer. I began my career in the U.S. Information Agency when people still remembered Edward R. Murrow. I ended it shortly after Afghanistan as a State Department public diplomacy officer with a press officer who had never, ever worked with the press, nor spoke Dari. I'm wondering if those of you in the networks ever noticed that USIA went away and if you think that was part of the weakening of the ability to report stories with great objectivity overseas?

TED KOPPEL: Marvin and I became friends after I came back from three years in Indochina and was assigned to the State Department as diplomatic correspondent. I have been blessed throughout my television career with having Marvin Kalb and Bernie Kalb as competitors. And as you may imagine, you don’t travel with people from your own network, you travel with the opposition. And I was really blessed in having these two men as opponents of mine.

During the years that we traveled together covering Henry Kissinger in the Middle East, we always had someone from Voice of America on the plane. And I remember a woman by the name of Kuenig [?], wasn't it?

MARVIN KALB: Yes, Marie.

TED KOPPEL: Marie Kuenig, who was the Voice of America reporter, and she didn’t talk much. She wasn't the one belaboring Henry Kissinger with questions. But she wrote very clean copy and she was a very good reporter. And I haven't been a diplomatic correspondent in many years, so I don’t travel with the Secretary of State anymore. But I rather suspect you don’t have anyone from VOA traveling with the Secretary anymore and that's a loss.
MARVIN KALB: I want to share something with you all. Being a competitor with Koppel, when we traveled around the Middle East, in those years I had a very bad back condition. And when we arrived somewhere, we’d all have our portable typewriter and our overnight bag and the big stuff went in the plane. ABC News picked up very often my typewriter, my overnight bag, because he could see I couldn’t pick it up. Now, that's being a good competitor, being a sweetheart. Yes, please?

DAVID EARL: My name is David Earl, I'm an alum of GW’s SMPA. And Mr. Koppel, I was hoping you could talk a little bit more about what you define as objectivity. Is it moderating two political sides? And where does your analysis come in? And I would use the example of global warming, for example, as how would you have covered that story in that time?

TED KOPPEL: I'm sorry, covered which story?

DAVID EARL: The story of global warming, when most of the scientific community seems to be pretty solid on one side but it’s still very much a politicized issue. Does objectivity dictate that you're saying that you're going to maintain both sides, or do you accept who you deem to be the highest and most credible people in that discussion?

TED KOPPEL: Look, you're looking at a man I was for almost 26 years, both the anchor and the managing editor of Nightline. And I was death on reporters who would go out and give me one opinion for, one opinion against, and one right down the middle. It is the laziest form of journalism there is in the world. To the degree that one side or the other can be ascertained as having the facts on its side, you have an obligation to report that. I don't think there's an obligation to say, “On the one hand, Newtonians believe that an apple will fall from a tree and will hit the ground and there is a law that says that.” And simply because there's some idiot out there who claim that apples float. So no,
objectivity does not mean taking one of this side and one of that side and presenting both for the audience to select.

Your job as a journalist is precisely to go out, to do the reporting. And then, as I said earlier on, to analyze it, to separate the wheat from the chaff, to put it into a proper context. And if the overwhelming scientific community or if the scientific community overwhelmingly says there is global warming, do you give a nod in the direction of some other intelligent voice? Yes, why not? But you certainly don’t do it on the basis of equal time.

MARVIN KALB: When the pressure first was directed at the networks to be objective and fair, what they would do, as you remember, is they would put a Republican up here for 30 seconds, and a Democrat here for 30 seconds, and then they were being objective and they felt that they were telling the story. But they never got at the essence of objectivity, as I think you have so well described it tonight. Yes, please?

KATHERINE RODRIGUEZ: Good evening, Mr. Koppel. My name is Katherine Rodriguez, I am a junior, a journalism major at the School of Media and Public Affairs at GW. And my question is in this highly volatile political climate, we've noticed several instances where major news networks rushed for a headline that turned out to be wrong, like with Wolf Blitzer and the Obamacare Supreme Court rulings. And in our profession, how do we balance accuracy with the desire to be the first to break the news?

MARVIN KALB: Terrific question, thank you.

TED KOPPEL: Look, I've been lecturing quite literally for 25 years or more about this desperate struggle to be first with the obvious, which I think is often sort of the driving engine, particularly of 24/7 cable news. Somehow, and this goes back to the times when
there were just three networks, there would still be-- when a major story broke, I still remember moments of huge self congratulation at ABC and I'm sure it was the same at CBS or NBC, if we could say--

MARVIN KALB: I'm first.

TED KOPPEL: --We had the story one minute and 38 seconds before CBS did. And I remember saying at the time, and I was a very young journalist at the time, I don't know of anybody out there, the American public that is, who is sitting there as we were sitting in our newsrooms with a bank of ten television monitors aware of the fact that CBS may have had something first, NBC got it second, and oh my God, we were third. If you were at home watching television, are you switching madly between and among channels?

And what was bad 25 years ago is absolutely horrendous today. You know, if I'm watching CNN and if I think they're doing a fairly decent job of covering a story, I am not constantly flipping back. Now again, that may be generation. I have teenage grandsons who seem incapable of watching anything for more than eight seconds at a time without switching to another channel. But no, I-- did I answer your question?

MARVIN KALB: Not really, but it’s very good.


TED KOPPEL: All right.

MARVIN KALB: It was a very good question. There's one more here, and you're going to be the last one, I'm afraid, because we're out of time. But I want to apologize to
everybody else who's waiting to ask a question, I'm sorry. But when this is all over, why
don't you besiege Mr. Koppel and then you can get your question answered.

TED KOPPEL: And beat the crap out of him. [laughter]

CAT SHRIER: Well, thanks very much for taking my question. My name is Cat Shrier, I'm a graduate student in multimedia journalism up at University of Maryland. I also have an online news site called WaterCitizenNews.com, cool, clear water citizen news talking about water that is usually considered to be dull and boring in a way that's fun and sexy and cool and engaging. And we have all these tools not just to disseminate--

MARVIN KALB: No, Miss, ask your question please?

CAT SHRIER: --to get the information out and throughout the evening, it seems like we've been given this choice of Charlie Sheen reporting, perhaps less soulful significance, and important, significant news that affects our lives presented in a way that's dull. And when we have so many tools at our disposal, why do we need to think about important news as being something that can't be cool and engaging and fun and even profitable? And why does it have to be presented as something as dull as an alternative?

MARVIN KALB: Okay, thanks.

TED KOPPEL: Well, you may be surprised to learn that I don't entirely disagree with you. For many, many years at Nightline, I used to tell the staff, “There is no story out there that we cannot do in an engaging and interesting way.” I think you've made the, perhaps, understandable mistake of interpreting what Marvin and I have been saying when we refer to important, that important means even in our minds, dull. On the
contrary. I think the most interesting things in the world are precisely those things that are most important. And I think it is our obligation as journalists not merely to say, “Here are the facts, do with them as you will,” but to put those facts into-- and perhaps I should have added the adjective ‘interesting’ context. We have to make the news interesting or we can't expect anybody to watch.

But if interesting means controversial, if interesting means argumentative, if interesting means sacrificing objectivity, then I guess you're right. In that case, I'm doomed to be seen as dull.

MARVIN KALB: I don't think you've ever been dull. Thank you, Ted, very, very much. And thanks all of you for being here. It's been a terrific evening, most grateful to you.

TED KOPPEL: Thank you.

MARVIN KALB: Thank you very much. Thank you, pal, you're as wonderful as ever.

END