STORY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

This is London: Edward R. Murrow and the "Good War"

Luigi Bradizza, Ph.D.

Dr. Bradizza is a faculty member of the Department of Political Science at Salve Regina University in Newport, RI and his primary scholarly research includes American political thought and the principles of the American founding.

In retrospect, it is obvious that America needed to join Britain in the fight against Hitler. It wasn't as obvious at the time—not before Pearl Harbor, not to American isolationists. But we are a democracy. Public opinion matters—and public opinion can change.

Edward R. Murrow helped change public opinion about the war in Europe. Murrow was a reporter in an age before television. But he had three priceless assets that helped him reach and profoundly affect the American people: his razor-sharp reporter's judgment, his arresting voice, and radio.

Murrow delivered captivating broadcasts from London for CBS, beginning at the outbreak of the war. He started each broadcast with the dramatic sentence, "*This* is London." He ended each broadcast with "good night, and good luck." During the height of the Battle of Britain, Murrow and his CBS team delivered dozens of shortwave broadcasts per week from Europe. His voice was heard in many millions of homes across the United States.

Murrow brought the war vividly into the homes of Americans by carefully choosing the particular details he reported. A broadcast might portray a small detail of life in London—say, the sound of people walking down a street during the Blitz, while an air raid siren could be heard wailing in the background. Or he might tell listeners exactly how children were being relocated out of London for their safety—and how their parents stoically persevered with their family separated. And he would tell Americans how well and how bravely the British people were carrying on. Americans are impressed by stories of courageous holdouts. A people raised on historical accounts of Valley Forge and the Alamo could effortlessly place the British in the appropriate narrative category. But they needed to know that the British were worthy of their sympathy—and Murrow's broadcasts told them they were.

Murrow's importance was not lost on political leaders in London or Washington. The British saw him as an ally in their war effort—as much a part of the war of words as their own BBC. And there was an unspoken alliance between Murrow and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The two men met, but they did not need to spell out what each thought of the efforts of the other. They knew.

PELL CENTER for INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS and PUBLIC POLICY
SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

How influential was Murrow? His biographer Philip Seib puts it this way:

> Murrow's broadcasts offset some of the impact of speeches by Lindbergh and other isolationist leaders. Isolationist allies and special broadcasts undoubtedly had effect, but Murrow was in the American living room almost every day. Journalism changes opinion in small increments, and Murrow's depictions of Europe's peril and Hitler's menace were effective partly because they were heard so frequently [*Broadcasts from the Blitz*, 24-25].

In tangible terms, Murrow's broadcasts arguably tipped the scales for Lend-Lease.

Let me close by touching on perhaps the most controversial question one can ask about Murrow: was he objective? Seib doesn't think so: "A journalist who sees evil has a responsibility to alert the world to it. Journalists are the sentinels of conscience and in that role should not be totally constrained by objectivity." I think that this is an erroneous and perhaps even dangerous analysis. Seib suggests that we can sacrifice objectivity for a good cause. I would put it this way: journalists must be able to assert the worthwhileness of their profession. Therefore, a journalist *qua* journalist is not permitted to be impartial between Roosevelt and Lindbergh when he believes that journalism needs the former's war policies and cannot survive the latter's. By perceptibly leaning his broadcasts in the pro-British direction, Murrow was defending civilization, freedom, truth, journalism—and objectivity.

www.salve.edu/pellcenter

About the Pell Center

The Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University is a multi-disciplinary research center focused at the intersection of politics, policies, and ideas. Dedicated to honoring Senator Pell's legacy, the Center promotes American engagement in the world, effective government at home, and civic participation by all Americans.

PELL CENTER
for INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
and PUBLIC POLICY

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY