

Editorial

On current history

The quality of American news reporting is so low, that one joke making the rounds, is that the only reason for the trial of O.J. Simpson is to increase Ted Turner's revenue. The standards for newspaper, radio, and television reporting today, particularly in the United States, are far below what would barely have been considered respectable 20 or 30 years ago. The interesting question to consider is: What should news reporting be about? Is the notion of *current events*, which has replaced history as a schoolroom topic, the proper subject of a news report?

Can one possibly learn the truth about a reported event which is treated as a *current event*? Turner's "Headline" news carries a promotional message that this 24-hour-a-day news service covers *now*, the news as it happens. A little reflection makes obvious that recording the occurrence of an event and understanding its importance in context, are quite different. Simply to know what may have happened (even assuming on-the-spot-news coverage to be attempting to be honest, at least to the extent of what it does and does not report), is literally to know nothing.

Surely there is *current history*, that is, history as it is being made; but how might that be captured in real time? First, one must judge its significance, not as a local occurrence, but in terms of its global importance; not merely as a happening of today, but, on first approximation, as an event in postwar history, which could be defined as beginning in 1943—the point at which the preparations for and the fights over the postwar world were being fought out. These, in turn, must be placed in the context of the history of the post-Civil War period, which then leads to consideration of the history of the United States as a nation, and so on.

Take, for example, President Clinton's repudiation of the so-called special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. This calls into question what was in fact the origin of this *special relationship*. We are reminded of the fight which occurred between Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill as to the future of the British Empire, which Roosevelt wished

to see dismantled summarily. Not only were Roosevelt and Churchill in violent, if muted, disagreement on this issue, but Roosevelt further infuriated the British prime minister by his even-handed approach to Joseph Stalin.

Contrasted to this was the transition, on April 12, 1945, from Roosevelt to Harry Truman. It was at this point that the special relationship with Britain (which Henry Kissinger boasted about in his infamous Chatham House speech on May 10, 1982) really began.

In contrast to Roosevelt, who was a polished adversary to Churchill, the easily manipulated Truman became Churchill's pawn, without Truman even realizing it. Beginning with his willingness to use nuclear weapons against Japan, Truman swallowed the bait of Churchill's creation of the "Cold War," hook, line, and sinker. Thus, under the guise of the need for a common front against Stalin, the British were able to shape the postwar period in conformity with the *de facto* survival of their empire.

How can any serious person believe Ted Turner's claim that being informed of things in the *now*, in other words, current events, is a substitute for understanding current history?

Let us look at another, associated feature of current news—the rise of terrorism. One cannot understand the ongoing increase in international terrorist incidents, including the threats against the lives of President Clinton and French President Jacques Chirac, without understanding the role of the British in the assassination of President Kennedy, President McKinley, and President Lincoln, and in the attempts on the life of Charles de Gaulle. They, like the American and French Presidents today, were opposing the perceived interests of British imperial policy, and this, for the British monarchy, was not to be tolerated.

The postwar period is now coming to an end. If it is not to be followed by the destruction of the United States, and the cultural, political, and economic devastation of post-Renaissance Western civilization, then we had best recognize that we had much better turn off the television news, and learn some history.