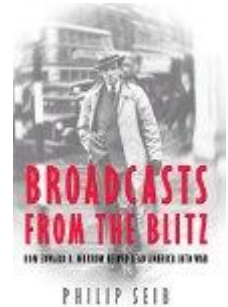


**Philip Seib.** *Broadcasts from the Blitz: How Edward R. Murrow Helped Lead America into War.* C.: Potomac Books, 2006. 209 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-59797-012-9.



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## Murrow the Persuader

During wartime, public interest is one of the most important factors determining whether the military, as part of a democratic society, succeeds or fails. Few would deny that today's military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from the uneasiness of uncertain public support. At perhaps no time in history has such disquiet penetrated mass media, which in past wars has assumed the role of solidifying public opinion. Indeed, war is theoretically a last resort to resolving international dilemmas, and the media has proved to be crucial (at least until now) in persuading people that it is necessary.

Edward R. Murrow--internationalist, communicator, educator, and radio broadcast journalist--took that responsibility seriously, as Philip Seib concludes in his tightly focused *Broadcasts from the Blitz*, an account of Adolf Hitler's 1940-41 bombardment of London during World War II and the impact of Murrow's radio reports. Whether it was for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the brink of re-election, the British prime minister Winston Churchill in need of an ally, or CBS

founder William Paley, Murrow was the man of the hour--and for good reasons. Murrow's knowledge of international affairs, his deep-seated beliefs, and his riveting voice made him the standard bearer for the powerful new medium of broadcast radio that brought into North American homes the sound of bombs destroying London.

Although he includes other prominent journalists, Seib's narrow focus on the blitz of London tends to credit Murrow as having single-handedly drawn the United States into the European conflict. I say "tends" because Seib ultimately vacillates, muddying both our sense of Murrow's significance and the thorny issue of journalistic objectivity. The problem surfaces in the preface where Seib raises the question of objectivity as the key issue in Murrow's approach to journalism. Seib indicates that he sees no ethical transgression--no violation of journalistic principle--in Murrow's work. Instead, he states that "a journalist who sees evil has a responsibility to alert the world to it," and he describes journalists as "the sentinels of conscience" (p. x). Throughout the

book, however, Seib questions Murrow's sincerity (if not his honesty), an incongruity that spoils the book for me, but, more important, calls attention to the need for a well-framed discussion on objectivity at the beginning, if that is the main argument.

A number of biographical accounts and Murrow's own well-documented personal comments show that the broadcaster was his own source of authority, but it was authority reinforced (or made possible) by people in high places of like mind for that time and for those circumstances. Indeed, the idea of singular authority appears in other studies of the media and World War II. In her cultural analysis of reporting during World War II, media scholar Mary S. Mander concluded that war correspondents faced only two restrictions--military security and common sense. She couples the idea of common sense with the meaning of democracy to suggest that "each man is his own source of authority." [1] War correspondents described what they saw and heard as it happened, a job they were presumably given based on their sense of responsibility, integrity, and good judgment. (Mander makes no mention of Murrow; instead, her references are to the journalists covering several theaters of war including the Normandy beachhead and the invasion of the Marshall Islands.)

Murrow was not the only American journalist at the time advocating U.S. intervention. Journalist Vincent Sheean, to whom Seib refers briefly throughout the book, also made lecture tours in the United States advocating early intervention, to which Seib does not specifically refer (pp. 25-26). *Colliers* correspondent Quentin Reynolds is also discussed, but Murrow's role is seen as "more significant" not only in shaping American public opinion but "also in the way Britain presented itself to the United States" (p. 71).

In trying to follow the thread of Seib's argument, several discrepancies are worth considering. In chapter 1, the author states that Murrow

was sensitive about maintaining balanced reporting and quotes from Murrow's report of 1 September 1939: "I have an old-fashioned belief that Americans like to make up their own minds on the basis of all available information. The conclusions you draw are your own affair. I have no desire to influence them and shall leave such efforts to those who have more confidence in their own judgment than I have in mine" (pp. 9-10). But Seib contends that Murrow was being "disingenuous" (p. 10) in claiming that he had "no desire to influence" (pp. 150-151). In 1939, however, CBS news broadcasting was in its infancy and, it can be argued, was born in Europe as the western world held its collective breath on that fateful first day of September. It is hardly surprising that Murrow, as CBS's young European director, was tentative. To say that Murrow was insincere is merely opinion and is unfair since an opinion is a belief for which no proof is required.

Further, toward the end of the first chapter, Seib depicts Murrow as a journalist who, throughout his career, was "a resolute champion of high journalistic standards," one who saw his responsibility to be the "search for truth" (pp. 45-46). At the same time, though, Seib dismisses Murrow's protégé (and pioneer CBS newscaster) Charles Collingwood's endorsement of Murrow as a straight shooter when it came to inserting his "opinion" in his broadcasts. Seib also dismisses Murrow's own take on personal opinion, which Murrow said should be "frankly labeled" (p. 44). Seib says Murrow's opinions could be found in his reports "without being 'frankly labeled'" (p. 44), but fails to provide examples.

In chapter 2, the author states that Murrow went beyond his role as a CBS broadcaster when he advised the BBC to broaden its target audience in North America to include the United States as well as Canada. But Murrow was more than a broadcaster; he was the director of CBS's European operation in London. At the same time, American-born Nazi propagandists Fred Kalten-

bach and William Joyce had full access to the airwaves and to both British and American radio listeners--a logical reason to have the BBC piped to the United States as a counterbalance.

It is perhaps in his discussion of the close relationship between CBS and the BBC and its relationship with the British Security Services and the Foreign Office that Seib makes the most cogent point regarding objectivity and the role of the journalist. The discussion concerns Murrow's close involvement with signal intelligence whose purpose was to analyze government-controlled broadcasts on international affairs in totalitarian countries. Even here, however, the author wavers, suggesting that "high stakes" require "flexibility." Moreover, he shifts the onus to the British leadership who, Seib says, "assumed that [Murrow] was not neutral," and was therefore a "valuable asset" to the British cause. Being "on the side of the 'good guys,'" Seib says, "[p]erhaps ... gave him ethical leeway" (pp. 73-74).

Murrow's star faded when he no longer served the purposes of political propaganda and corporate media moguls. Murrow's biographers, especially Alexander Kendrick in *Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow* (1969) and Joseph E. Persico in *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original* (1998), have both dealt with these issues comprehensively. So has Nicholas Cull's *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign against American "Neutrality" in World War II* (1995). Then, too, there is the rest of the material on Murrow, including the hundreds of books, articles, movies, videos, documentaries, and Web sources.

In light of such a mountain of sources, it is difficult to know what gap, if any, Seib's work fills. Murrow's assessment of world events before and during World War II undoubtedly influenced his reporting. In *Selling War*, Cull states that Murrow was deliberately cultivated by the British Foreign Office Agency in New York City to tell the British war story to convince Americans to come to their aid.[2]

The difficulty with *Broadcasts from the Blitz* is that it is not clear either in its depiction of Murrow or in its argument about objectivity. The book's conclusion is also troublesome in that it draws inferences to contemporary world conflicts: "Sometimes the powerful must act," the author suggests, "and to ensure that they do journalists should never hesitate to jab the world's conscience and show why timely, forceful measures are essential" (p. 173). Given strong endorsements by media giants like Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather, both former CBS personalities, this book will likely receive wide readership, as it should, but it should also, and for the same reason, stimulate a fresh discussion about objective news reporting.

#### Notes

[1]. Mary S. Mander, "American Correspondents during World War II: Common Sense as a View of the World," *American Journalism* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 17-30.

[2]. Nicholas Cull, *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign against American "Neutrality" in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 24-25.

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