

Walter Cronkite, the NY Times, and the Korean Airliner Massacre
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Walter Cronkite was the leading television newscaster about the Space Race, and his folksy style connected with millions of viewers of the Apollo-11 moon landing in 1969. His well-earned place in the hearts of the public – and especially of space workers and enthusiasts – was formally recognized in early 2006 by NASA's presentation to him – the only non-astronaut on the honors list – of a chip of moon rock.

While covering space events, Cronkite and his staff worked hard to get it right. But in later years, serious questions were raised about how “right” Cronkite's space-related memoirs really were (see <http://www.thespacereview.com/article/570/1>). Or maybe it should be asked, how “left” were some of his judgments?

When the question arises about the level of Cronkite's aerospace technical errors and any potential political motivations for them, it's interesting to consider NY Times columnist Tom Wicker's comments in his review of Cronkite's book, "A Reporter's Life". Writing in the N.Y. Times (January 26, 1997), he asserted that "Cronkite also displays here his avid interest in and **great knowledge** of the space program." But while all humans are subject to error, some of Cronkite's errors (such as giving a 'pass' to the Soviet Union in losing the moon race, trusting Moscow's self-serving declarations while ignoring evidence uncovered by American and European space historians) may hint at underlying political biases.

Sometimes Cronkite's aerospace history judgment was even more questionable, as exemplified by his endorsement of the loony-tune book "Incident at Sakhalin - The True Mission of KAL Flight 007", by Michel Brun, a retired French pilot. Brun argued that the 1983 Korean airliner shootdown near Sakhalin Island was a hoax perpetuated by the CIA, during which American jets destroyed the civilian airliner and then later engaged in a bloody dogfight with Soviet interceptors, an air battle both sides agreed to cover up.

Despite the egregiously crackpot nature of the theory, the stridently anti-American spin of its conclusions, and the sloppy and cooked-up 'facts', Cronkite allowed (I verified this with his staff) his words of support to be published on the book jacket: "This book has importance far beyond its sensational and dramatic revelations of a Cold war intelligence ploy that turned into a military engagement - an aerial battle that could easily have escalated into World War III."

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/1568580541/ref=sib_dp_bod_bc/103-5921901-4736623?%5Fencoding=UTF8&p=S0A2#reader-link]

The book portrays US government officials as cold-blooded murderers as well as secret plotters and liars - but without any evidence that any serious aerospace historian considers valid. Yet that indictment was endorsed by Cronkite, who loaned his credibility to the claim.

Expanding from this echo of Soviet disinformation, Cronkite went into “lecture mode” on the back cover of the book: “That importance concerns the covenant that exists in a democracy between a government and its people regarding the matter of honesty. A democracy depends on an informed electorate, and it ceases to be a democracy when its agents conspire to deny the people the truth. Democracy is no democracy when it is conducted in the dark.

Lecturing the Reagan Administration (those in charge during the shutdown), Cronkite continued: “When the people are forced by its own misdeeds to distrust their government, the nation is weakened and the democracy itself is imperiled. As harsh as may be the truth here exposed, it can be hoped that these revelations will inspire a greater responsibility in government and thus justify the people’s confidence in it.”

What was he saying? The crackpot accusations represent “truths” about “misdeeds”, and are “harsh”, because Reagan officials “conspired[d] to deny the people the truth” – was that his intent? It sure reads that way. But curiously, Cronkite never seems to have been motivated enough to get CBS News, or even the independent projects he worked on in his retirement, to pursue such “harsh truths”.

In the years after the aviation tragedy, the New York Times had actively pursued the story. Although it claimed to be following professional, even-handed journalism, many observers (myself included) detected a pattern in the late 1980’s of conferring credibility on crackpot conspiracy claims. The chief US proponent of such views, John Keppel, seems to have had a ‘free pass’ to the ‘letters’ column while contrary views were squelched. But it was more than on the editorial page – the slant was detectable in straight news reporting by the assigned aviation expert, Richard Witkin.

For all serious investigators, the conclusions of the International Civil Aeronautics Organization (a United Nations group) were compelling. In the initial absence of hard data, their panel still concluded in 1984 that crew error was the most likely cause. When after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 the hidden ‘black box’ recorders were turned over by Yeltsin’s government to the UN, the investigation was reopened and the original assessment was thoroughly vindicated by a French team in 1993.

But this wasn’t the news fit to print, not according to the New York Times, which treated all such exculpatory results with extreme suspicion. “Doubts persist” read the newspaper’s headlines, long after serious researchers had dispelled all rational doubts.

Witkin, who wrote most of these stories., denied any bias, of course. But then he retired and felt safe to tell the truth. Free to speak his personal feelings, he sent a glowing endorsement to another crackpot spy-flight book that he called “the most detailed and comprehensive analysis of KE007's flight path that I've seen and the only one that stands up." [<http://www.vgernet.net/roberta/aboutbook.html>]

Even while still on duty, he barely hid his preference for conspiracies. In a November 22, 1987 review of a book by David Pearson (author of the stupid feature article in ‘The

Nation'), Witkin (who falsely called the author "an expert on military affairs" – his new PhD was in sociology) wrote: "Pearson has made a significant contribution to the controversy over the incident [and] made some provocative revelations."

So much for the claimed NY Times 'objectivity' on the subject. If a criminal massacre by the USSR could be spun into an anti-American lesson, they (and Walter Cronkite) were the ones willing and able to do it.

Even in the immediate aftermath of the airliner massacre, some leading NY Times opinion writers (besides the newsman Witkin) found the spyflight propaganda persuasive. On the first anniversary of the shootdown, one of the newspapers top writers declared that the American news media showed "complicity with [the US] government" by not holding the US at least partially guilty for the Soviet action. This was despite what the writer termed "an authoritative article" in "The Nation" magazine that, in his words, "establish[ed] to a reasonable certainty that numerous U.S. government agencies knew or should have known, almost from the moment Flight 007 left Anchorage, Alaska, that it was off course and headed for intrusion into Soviet air space, above some of the most sensitive Soviet military installations" – but didn't warn them.

Either the high-priced Pentagon spy network broke down, the author argues, or a "staggering" idea must be true: "All these agencies deliberately chose not to guide the airliner back on a safe course, because its projected overflight of the Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Island would activate Soviet radar and air defenses and thus yield a "bonanza" of intelligence information to watching and listening U.S. electronic devices." The author raised this theory "at least to the high probability level.

The column on the editorial page (even Witkin with his secret, long-denied biases never reported such claims as factual) described a collection of US observation assets. He also accepts "substantial evidence that Soviet radar detection and communications systems over Kamchatka and Sakhalin were being jammed that night which would help account for their documented difficulty in catching up to Flight 007", and asserted that "the airliner changed course slightly after passing near a U.S. RC-135 reconnaissance plane".

The evidence argues, he concludes, that "President Reagan and the security establishment have greater responsibility for Flight 007's fate than they admit-or that a complaisant press has been willing to seek."

This sounds a lot like what Cronkite wrote a decade later for the back dust jacket of the crackpot spyflight book. This may be more than coincidence: the author of that 1984 NY Times column was Tom Wicker, the man who later would be chosen by the NY Times to review Cronkite's own book and praise Cronkite's "great knowledge". Their mutual make-believe expertise had come full circle and the anti-American interpretation of the Korean Airliner massacre was the thread that tied Wicker, Witkin, and Cronkite together.

Wicker, at least, had opportunities to read subsequent research on the airliner shootdown, and see in the end how the article in “The Nation” that he had been so eager to trust had been bogus, the ‘facts’ all misunderstandings or deliberate fictions. He later retracted his accusations, in print. He never let his words be used on crackpot anti-American conspiracy books, as Witkin and Cronkite did. He overcame his initial biases and repudiated the errors he had initially promulgated [curiously, internet search engines easily locate his original accusations but are much less helpful in tracking down his subsequent repudiation of them – try it yourself!].

Cronkite, however, never has withdrawn those words damning America for complicity in the airliner passengers’ deaths. But how about his words on the dust jacket, that “a democracy depends on an informed electorate, and it ceases to be a democracy when its agents conspire to deny the people the truth”? This example shows a case in which Cronkite and his associates in the news media, not the US government, were denying the people the truth.

Recall how Cronkite had written: “When the people are forced by its own misdeeds to distrust their government, the nation is weakened and the democracy itself is imperiled.” That goes double for the ‘Fourth Estate’ that is supposed to be the medium for accurate information. I had written Cronkite with specifications of the factual flaws in Brun’s book in 1996 [<http://www.jamesoberg.com/02201996openlettercronkitekal.html>] (two copies sent – no answer), and have no idea if he ever read or considered these counter-arguments.

Further, he had written: “It can be hoped that these revelations will inspire a greater responsibility in government and thus justify the people’s confidence in it”.

But when will Cronkite, the most respected American journalist to endorse the slander that the US was to blame for the killing all 269 people (including an American congressman) on that plane, take responsibility for helping mislead the public about these aspects of aerospace? There’s not much time left, for him or for Witkin, a WW2 veteran B-24 pilot.