

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with a subtle vertical gradient. Scattered across the background are several stylized, light green leaf motifs, each consisting of two leaves on a short stem, pointing towards the right.

# **NEWS FOR EVERYMAN**

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**Radio and Foreign Affairs in Thirties America**

**David Holbrook Culbert**

 **Greenwood**  
PUBLISHING GROUP

# *News for Everyman*

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Affairs in  
Thirties America*

David Holbrook Culbert



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My greatest debt is to Professor Richard W. Leopold of Northwestern University. He and the person to whom this book is dedicated have been major influences on me.

*February 1975*

DAVID HOLBROOK CULBERT

## List of Abbreviations

BP-1969—Broadcast Pioneers History Project, *Fifth Progress Report* (New York, July, 1969), listing contents of Broadcast Pioneers Library, 1771 N St. N.W., Washington, D.C.

Burlingame MSS—Roger Burlingame MSS, Manuscript Division, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, New York

Carr MSS—Wilbur J. Carr MSS, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Castle MSS—William R. Castle MSS, Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa

CBS Library—Columbia Broadcasting System Library, 524 W. 57th St., New York, New York

CBS Program Information—Columbia Broadcasting System, Program Information, 51 W. 52d St., New York, New York

Comm OF, HHL—Official File, Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa

Davies MSS—Joseph E. Davies MSS, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Davis MSS—Elmer Davis MSS, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Davis MSS, NYPL—Elmer Davis MSS, Special Collections, New York Public Library, New York, New York

FCC, WNRC-Suitland—Station Files, Federal Communications Commission, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Maryland

FD-NBC—National Broadcasting Company, Program Reference Library, unmarked file drawer, Room 279, Rockefeller Center, New York, New York

FO—Correspondence of the Foreign Office, Public Record Office, Portugal St., London

Frankfurter MSS—Felix Frankfurter MSS, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Hopkins MSS—Harry L. Hopkins MSS, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York

Hornbeck MSS—Stanley K. Hornbeck MSS, Manuscript Division, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford, California

Hull MSS—Cordell Hull MSS, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Kaltenborn MSS—H. V. Kaltenborn MSS, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin

Kaltenborn MSS, NYPL—H. V. Kaltenborn MSS, Special Collections, New York Public Library, New York, New York

Kent MSS—Fred I. Kent MSS, Manuscript Division, Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey

Lewis MSS—Fulton Lewis, Jr., MSS, Manuscript Division, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, New York

Lohr MSS—Lenox R. Lohr MSS, Manuscript Division, Chicago Circle Campus of the University of Illinois, Chicago, Illinois

Moffat Diary—Jay Pierrepont Moffat Diary, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

NBC-*Talks*—Mimeographed lectures to National Broadcasting Company employees, 1939-1941, copies in Program Reference Library, unmarked file drawer, Room 279, Rockefeller Center, New York, New York

NBC Warehouse—National Broadcasting Company Warehouse, 136 W. 52d St., New York, New York

OF,FDRL—Official File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York

*Personal Letters*—Elliott Roosevelt and Joseph P. Lash, eds., *F.D.R.: His Personal Letters, 1928-1945*, 2 vols. (New York, 1950)

Phonoarchive—Milo Ryan Phonoarchive, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

PPI, HHL—Post-Presidential Individual File, Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa

PPF, FDRL—President's Personal File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York

PSF, HHL—President's Secretary's File, Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa

PSF, FDRL—President's Secretary's File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York

Radio Archive-Memphis—Radio Archive, Dr. Marvin R. Bensman, Department of Speech & Drama, Memphis State University, Memphis, Tennessee

"A Reporter Remembers!"—"Edward R. Murrow: A Reporter Remembers, Vol. I, The War Years," 33 1/3 rpm commercial recording Columbia 02L-332

RG 44—Office of Government Reports, Record Group 44, Archives Branch, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Maryland

RG 59—Department of State Files, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

RG 122—Federal Trade Commission, Record Group 122, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

RG 173—Federal Communications Commission, Radio Division, Record Group 173, National Archives, Washington, D.C.



RG 208—Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Archives Branch,  
Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Maryland

RPORC—The Roper Public Opinion Research Center, Williams College, Wil-  
liamstown, Massachusetts

RSS-LC—Recorded Sound Section, Music Division, Library of Congress,  
Washington, D.C.

*Secret Diary*—Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes*, 3 vols.  
(New York, 1953-1954)

Sevareid MSS—Eric Sevareid MSS, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress,  
Washington, D.C.

Stimson MSS—Henry L. Stimson MSS, Manuscript Division, Yale University  
Library, New Haven, Connecticut

Swing MSS—Raymond Gram Swing MSS, Manuscript Division, Library of  
Congress, Washington, D.C.

# *News for Everyman*

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## Introduction:

# Social History and Foreign Affairs

The greatest shortcoming of historians, Felix Frankfurter once observed, is their failure to describe the “things that aren’t written down because everybody takes them for granted.”<sup>1</sup> Surely radio news has fit this category far too long. For in the 1930s everyone listened to the radio. “The Romance of Helen Trent” brought dark strangers into the lives of women of thirty-five “and even more.” “America’s Town Meeting of the Air” carried debate of current issues to serious listeners. Arturo Toscanini conducted the “NBC Symphony of the Air” in the homes of rich and poor; critics spoke optimistically of culture for all. Americans almost forgot the Depression, the empty bank book, the overdue rent as they turned in an endless variety of “free” programs designed to entertain and, occasionally, uplift.

In time most Americans listened to foreign news also—leaders as well as followers, urbanites and farmers, active politicians and lonely invalids. They heard overseas events interpreted by a new kind of communicator—the news commentator. These men—pundits, preachers, critics, special pleaders, as well as reporters—broadcast their way into positions of immense national fame. They became the new voices of authority, the new delineators of meaning. Listeners believed them to be educated, intelligent, privy to the secrets of the great. Commentators often sounded impartial, and somehow wise beyond other men. Their familiar voices—their unmistakably individual delivery—crackled into parlors, restaurants, and automobiles across the land. Radio made each listener feel personally concerned about foreign affairs.

This book discusses the broadcasts and the careers of six prominent newscasters of widely varying political persuasions: Boake Carter, H. V.

Kaltenborn, Raymond Gram Swing, Elmer Davis, Fulton Lewis, Jr., and Edward R. Murrow.<sup>2</sup> These oracles, heard but never seen, interpreted the world to America, in the process saying something about America's obligations toward the rest of the world and America's image of itself. Radio is central to an understanding of the United States during the decade of the Depression. But national self-awareness of the sort suggested by representatives of the electronic medium has also had consequences that have persisted long after most people forgot the individual voices of those who spoke. In this sense this book represents a first effort toward a more scholarly understanding of the roots of our age, the age of radio and television, the age of the aural and visual image.

The overseas events of the late 1930s created a new role for radio. Following the Munich crisis of September 1938, the newspaper extra became obsolete. Radio emerged as the major source for foreign news. The sounds and images of foreign events suddenly gained dramatic appeal for the listener, who could now hear the participants involved in far off crises. No matter if Hitler's tirades were incomprehensible; radio provided a running translation. More than ever before, the average person seemed to become genuinely fascinated by what took place overseas. The overwhelming amount of news—reported in bulletins almost as an event occurred—also made for widespread uncertainty and confusion. Hence the rise of the serious news commentator—desired by the bewildered listener who could hear the sounds of distant places but could not always understand what it all meant. Commentators tried to offer analysis. Their newscasts provide a diary of the day's events—particularly valuable since the keeping of formal diaries has largely disappeared.

Aside from experience in journalism and a flair for publicity, there were no specific requirements for becoming a commentator. Those who did so came from widely differing backgrounds. Davis was a Rhodes Scholar; Carter, a British immigrant who never attended college. Swing, an intensely moral man, joined his wife in committees of protest, such as one for Spanish intellectuals seeking asylum in America. Kaltenborn, Lewis, and Carter unashamedly used such promotional techniques as broadcasting aboard a ship on its way to Havana, or setting up a microphone in the middle of a Spanish battle in progress so that listeners could hear bullets whizzing overhead. Lewis and Carter read their own advertising copy and tried to make even the sponsor's product seem

newsworthy. Such devices help explain how radio news made itself attractive to the average person.

Much has been written about the impact of newspapers, books, and articles on American foreign policy before Pearl Harbor.<sup>3</sup> But the tyranny of custom, to say nothing of the easy availability of newspapers as opposed to broadcasts, has led to a curious phenomenon. Radio, although a major independent news source after 1938, has been assessed solely in terms of newspaper accounts. This book provides the first detailed description, based on the broadcasts themselves—in both recorded and written form—of radio's role in reporting foreign affairs during the 1930s. It examines six intermediaries between current events and the average person's understanding of what happened in the rest of the world.

This book has two purposes and thus properly focuses on two related problems: it describes the development of radio news commentary in the 1930s and discusses the relation between radio's coverage of foreign affairs and the making of foreign policy. To guard against misunderstanding I have decided to list the major points I am trying to make in this book at the outset:

1. Radio news created mass interest in foreign affairs beginning with the Munich crisis of September 1938. As a result radio emerged as the principal medium for combatting isolationism in America.<sup>4</sup>

2. Radio news was not objective in spite of government and network regulations requiring strict impartiality. Every commentator allowed his personal convictions to creep into his reporting of the news. Before August 1938, Boake Carter was a major force in keeping alive isolationist sentiment in the United States. No matter what happened in Europe or the Far East, Carter had a simple response: America had no business trying to take care of the rest of the world when there was so much to do at home. After August 1938, with the removal of Carter from CBS, none of the most popular commentators opposed the foreign policy objectives of Franklin D. Roosevelt. It proved impossible to discuss what was happening to Great Britain after 1939 without letting one's intonation or analysis betray what America's foreign policy should be. If some newspapers continued to attack the President, the same was not true for the major medium that provided information about the rest of the world for the average person.

3. The world situation created an interest in surprisingly serious commentary. The millions who listened to Raymond Gram Swing or

Elmer Davis got more immediate information, plus analysis about European affairs, than the reader who put twice as much time into reading a newspaper. For a time serious journalism captured a mass audience. After 1945 this audience largely disappeared, not because commentators prepared their analyses less carefully, but because most persons considered world events somehow less dramatic and immediate.

4. Before 1941 radio news devoted almost no space to news about the Far East. Listeners actually heard events as they happened in Europe; for the Far East they got little more than occasional brief summaries. As a result, the average person had much less emotional commitment to what happened in the Far East.

5. Radio commentators played a major role in creating a climate of opinion favorable to an interventionist foreign policy though they did not directly make foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt, with the lesson of Woodrow Wilson firmly in mind, was determined his foreign policy would find general acceptance. Radio commentators, willing after May 1940 to support any major proposal advanced by the President, greatly aided Roosevelt's campaign to create a popular majority favorable to full-scale intervention in Europe.

This book attempts a group portrait of six very individual personalities. The organization of this volume is determined by each news analyst's period of greatest national prominence. For Boake Carter the emphasis is on his activities between 1935 and August 1938; after that date he was banned from CBS and NBC. Although Kaltenborn broadcast the first news commentary in 1922, he did not become a household name until September 1938. Accordingly, I have described at length his coverage of the Munich crisis and what this meant for public acceptance of radio as a foreign news source. Davis, Swing, Lewis, and Murrow were not widely known as news analysts until after war began in Europe in September 1939.

The confines of a five- or fifteen-minute period, plus the obligation to present the day's major news, left little time for sustained analysis. Kaltenborn, Lewis, and Carter frequently offered hasty and unthinking remarks about foreign affairs. I felt it would be more helpful to demonstrate their broadcasting techniques and general attitudes than repeatedly to point out wild guesses and misinformation. Speaking nightly from London, Murrow described Britain at war. He did not attempt comprehensive world coverage, for he was a foreign correspondent in

London. In discussing English bravery, however, he used radio as a documentary medium more successfully than any other commentator before Pearl Harbor. Swing and Davis prepared their broadcasts carefully. I have therefore discussed their assessments of certain events more fully.

The most-discussed topic in American foreign policy between September 1939 and December 1941 concerned what the United States response should be toward German aggression. All six commentators dealt with this topic again and again. For this major issue I have reviewed each man's assessment and provided examples of what was said.

Because of network and Federal Communications Commission rulings concerning objectivity, before December 1941 no broadcaster stated explicitly that the United States should declare war on Hitler. With the exception of Murrow, it is not possible to give a precise date when those who favored increased American involvement overseas first spoke on the air about the necessity of full hostilities. But Murrow, Swing, Davis, and Kaltenborn welcomed deteriorating relations with Japan and Germany. To express their feelings they used such euphemisms as America's need to become a "fighting ally" or "full belligerent." After May 1940 they accepted the possibility of using armed force to stop Nazi aggression. Those who supported Roosevelt were willing to risk full hostilities because of American naval forces escorting merchant-ship convoys or a shoot-on-sight policy in the Atlantic. Two others, Carter and Lewis, vigorously opposed what they termed steps toward war, although their impact after 1939 was smaller since they broadcast over weaker station affiliates and at less popular hours.

Between May 1940 and December 1941 most commentators supported American intervention abroad. They believed fervently in the President and placed the initiative for making foreign policy in Roosevelt's hands. After Hitler invaded the Low Countries on May 10, 1940, and France fell a month later, commentators of such differing political beliefs as Davis, Swing, Kaltenborn, and Murrow accepted virtually any proposal that the President favored in foreign policy. And to these four, those who opposed Roosevelt became not political opponents, but villains.

How much did these commentators actually affect the making of foreign policy? Did Roosevelt or other administration leaders take specific courses of action because of what a radio commentator said in a broadcast? Did news commentators contribute in an informal way to the



governing process? Like everyone else who has tried to gauge the influence of the mass media on governmental decision-making in foreign policy, I have been unable to prove any direct connection. After reviewing the literature of public opinion theory, both by political scientists and by social psychologists, I became convinced that there is no way of showing the exact effect of what a journalist says or writes on those in authority.<sup>6</sup>

Yet to deny any direct connection—since there is no way to demonstrate it—is not to say that radio commentators had no impact on American attitudes toward foreign affairs. All six had millions of listeners who after 1938 tuned in overseas news before they read it in newspapers. Swing, Davis, Murrow, and Kaltenborn greatly influenced public thinking about the issue of war or peace after September 1939. The President found it useful to have unofficial spokesmen who commanded such large audiences urging the same policies he favored. What these commentators said helped significantly to define the issues of the so-called Great Debate in American foreign policy between 1939 and 1941. The removal of Boake Carter from regular broadcasting in 1938 because of his opposition to anything Roosevelt proposed concerning foreign affairs suggests that the administration found radio a medium where irrational criticism could be more damaging than similar remarks in printed form. My attempt to assess the friendships each man cultivated through personal visits and correspondence with those in positions of power shows that the radio commentator tried to increase his impact through the traditional methods employed by all journalists. In sum, what all six said on the air mattered to the country at large. They spoke at a time when public attention increasingly turned from domestic to foreign events.

The news analysts spoke over the three national networks, NBC, CBS, and MBS. All considered themselves experts on foreign affairs, although in some cases such self-assurance seems to have been the product of a heated imagination. I purposely selected two commentators who bitterly attacked Roosevelt—Carter and Lewis—as well as those who became staunch administration supporters. For each man there is, first, a biographical sketch focusing on his career in radio; then a description of his voice, diction, and manner on the air; an analysis of broadcasts that gained particular note; a summary of his attitudes toward the question of war or peace, 1939-1941; and finally, an attempt to assess his impact.

I have not tried to discuss everyone who covered news on radio. I did

not include Lowell Thomas, the most successful commentator of the decade and the one who probably attracted the greatest number of listeners, because he did not write his own copy, he did not analyze the news, and he omitted almost all political comment. In a 1969 oral history interview he described his approach:

MR. HENLE: But you never did parade your politics as newsmen.

MR. THOMAS: No. In fact, I avoided this to the point where my radio sponsors . . . seemed uncertain as to what my politics were.<sup>7</sup>

Years before he explained that “talks should be sprinkled with nonsense, with here and there a thrill, perhaps a sob. My talks are planned as entertainment, not education.”<sup>8</sup>

Thomas had a kinship with an early news program, “The March of Time,” in which actors impersonated the voices of persons in the news. He might well be included in another study of radio news in the 1930s—one focusing on the connection between news and entertainment.<sup>9</sup>

This book does not present the views of six newscasters on every substantive issue in American foreign policy between 1935, or even 1939, and 1941. For instance, the diplomatic historian will not find what each news analyst said about the Atlantic Charter or the repeal of the arms embargo in September 1939. For some commentators not every broadcast has survived; on almost no occasion were all six on the air the same day. Those interested in what these men said about most of the major foreign events during the six years before Pearl Harbor can consult the last three hundred pages of my doctoral dissertation, where such statements are arranged topically.<sup>10</sup>

I believe that a book about radio commentators must be based on actual tapes or original transcriptions of newscasts. Fortunately, for each commentator recorded broadcasts have survived.<sup>11</sup> But I have not hesitated to use other material as well. All but Murrow were experienced newspaper journalists before they began their careers in radio; all continued to publish even after they became prominent in the newer medium. The impact of Elmer Davis, in particular, came through both his written and his spoken work. Listening to numerous recorded broadcasts for each commentator has enabled me to suggest what each sounded like on the air, as well as to indicate how news commentary related to surrounding commercial copy and to programs that preceded or followed.