

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH TOM BROKAW

SUBJECT: "THE TIME OF OUR LIVES: PAST, PRESENT, PROMISE," A BROAD VIEW OF HOW AMERICAN LIFE HAS CHANGED SINCE THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND HOW TO FOSTER AMERICA'S FUTURE.

MODERATOR: MARK HAMRICK, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**MARK HAMRICK:**(Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Mark Hamrick. I'm a broadcast and online journalist with the Associated Press, and I'm the 104th President of the National Press Club. We are the world's leading professional organization for journalists, committed to our profession's future through our programming events such as this, while working to foster a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, we invite you to visit our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). And, to donate to programs offered to the public through our National Press Club Journalism Institute, you can see about that on our website as well.

So, on behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker today, as well as those of you attending today's event. Our head table includes guests of our speaker as well as working journalists who are Club members. And, if you hear applause today in the audience-- and this is our admonition during this highly charged political season, less relevant today-- If you hear applause in our audience, we note that members of the general public are attending. So it's not necessarily evidence of a lack of journalistic objectivity. [laughter] Got a lot of emails in the last few days. [laughter]

I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. And our luncheons are also featured on our member-produced weekly podcast from the National Press Club, available for free download on iTunes. You can also follow the action on Twitter, using the hash tag #NPCLUNCH. After our guest's speech concludes, we'll have Q & A. And I promise to ask as many questions as time permits.

And now it is time to introduce our head table. And please note, again in this highly charged political season, that a journalist presence at the head table does not signify or imply an endorsement of the speaker, although today is a little different. I would ask each of you to stand up briefly as your name is announced.

First of all, we begin from your right-- and I'm so pleased that he could join us here today-- a new member of the Club. His name is Walter Cronkite IV. [applause] He is a broadcast associate at CBS News. And he is-- he is grandson of the great Walter Cronkite. Great to have you here. [applause] Wes Pippert from the Missouri School of Journalism, and a former reporter for UPI, in the great State of South Dakota, where our speaker is from. Dana Ritter is a White House producer for CBN News. And, I'm told-- we may get a few chuckles out of this-- no disrespect to our guest speaker today-- owner of a dog named Brokaw. [laughter] We'll have rebuttals here momentarily. [laughter]

John Fogarty, a retired journalist and our NPC President from 1984. John, great to have you here today. Nel Minow, she is a writer on film, broadcast criticism and corporate governance, and the daughter of the great Newton Minow, who talked about television being a vast wasteland. I think he'd give our head speaker a pass on that point here today. [laughter] Nia Hawkins is a broadcast producer, online video journalist with the Associated Press. We'll skip over the podium for just a moment. Angela Greiling Keane is a reporter for Bloomberg News. And she's filling in as Chair of the Speakers Committee. And she's also our Club membership secretary. Thank you for all your hard work.

Skip over our guest speaker for just a moment. The outgoing Chair of our Speakers Committee, on assignment soon in Afghanistan, Melissa Charbonneau with Newshook Media has done such a fantastic job keeping our speakers lineup as good as it possibly can be. Bill McClusky, former AP broadcast journalist manager, and a national board member of the Society of Professional Journalists. Barbara Corcoran from Missouri School of Journalism and formerly head of the Radio and Television Digital News Association and a longtime associate of our guest speaker today in her role as executive producer of *Meet The Press*.

Kevin Roach is a VP of U.S. Broadcast News at Associated Press. Just so happens, he's also my boss. So, if you would like to send letters of praise, I will be accepting those throughout today's program. [laughter] At the end of the table, Jared Rizzi is the Washington correspondent with POTUS Radio Sirius XM. He is also a new member of the Press Club. And Jared, happy birthday. And a round of applause for our head table.

[applause]

**MARK HAMRICK:** If you remember, and you walk around the halls of this more than century-old institution, you will see priceless photos depicting history of our Club and our profession. And there are few individuals depicted more than once on those walls. And our guest speaker today, like FDR, is one of those. He has spoken at our Luncheons and is a winner of our Lifetime Achievement Fourth Estate Award.

And, if you'll indulge me for just a brief personal story, I have him to either thank or to blame for this career in journalism. Because it was during the administration of President Ford that I saw two network stars, Tom Brokaw and the husband of our guest today, Barbara John Corcoran, holding Ford at a Presidential news conference in Topeka, Kansas, where, as an impressionable youngster, I became fascinated with the work of broadcast news. And they were camped outside the ballroom of the Ramada Inn. I decided to get in the business anyway. But seeing that, I did set my sites on the business. And, while I have you to thank for that, Tom, I'm not so sure my wife would say the same thing. [laughter]

For decades, now, Americans have had breakfast with our guest, perhaps dinner, or even a night cap. He hosted the *Today Show* and was, of course, the longtime anchor of NBC Nightly News, and frequently serving as the host of primetime feature specials. He is here today to talk about his new book, *The Time of Our Lives: Examining the Past, Present and Promise of America*. And he will give us his unique perspective on this current point in history and tell us what he thinks about the great divide in our political climate.

Many of you are familiar with his remarkable story. A native of South Dakota, he married Miss South Dakota. And they will soon celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. His first TV news gigs were in Iowa, Nebraska and Atlanta. He joined NBC News in Los Angeles in 1966 as a reporter and would anchor at KNBC. We're told that he has covered 11 Presidential elections. He was in NBC's White House correspondent during Watergate. And he pivoted, with ease, then to host the *Today Show*.

In 1983 he became the anchor and managing editor of the Nightly News, where he remained until 2005. Having been named one of the most trusted people in America, according to polls, he was asked by NBC to step back in the spotlight to host *Meet the Press* after Tim Russert's tragic sudden death during the 2008 election.

He has won every major award in broadcast journalism. And, as we say, members of our Club know well that he is winner of the Fourth Estate Award given during a very memorable evening here in 2003, that same award given to Jim Lehrer just a few days ago at this very podium.

With his trademark Midwestern style not unlike that of CBS's Walter Cronkite, our guest is a natural storyteller, whether on the air or between the covers of a book. In 1998 he had a breakthrough achievement with his popular book, *The Greatest Generation*. It has been ranked among the best American cultural histories of the last century. And he has easily emerged from a career capturing history on the fly to one taking a longer view.

Other successful books have followed while remaining present on the air for NBC News. While he has been less than complimentary about baby boomers, he has remained appropriately neutral on politics. Several years ago, Rush Limbaugh referred to our guest as a "self-hating liberal." [laughter] While in his new book-- and this is a classic response-- he says, "Rush, of all people, should know that those of us who make a very good living listening to the sound of our own voices are incapable of self-hate." [laughter] "We think we're grand."

It's not often that we have the opportunity to have such a prestigious member of the National Press Club address our audience today. And we're pleased that he's willing to return once again. Please give a warm National Press Club welcome to Mr. Tom Brokaw.

[applause]

**TOM BROKAW:** Thank you-- thank you very much. The other piece of that was, the response to Rush, is that when I said, "We think we're grand," I include Rush in that fraternity, actually, which is true. Mr. Cronkite, welcome. It's grand to have you here. Your grandfather was not only a great friend, but he was the Godfather of a small club to which I belong, where people who were once the anchor of the Evening News. And, although this audience knows your grandfather very well, I'm going to share with them a story about your grandmother, who was one of the most favorite people that any of us could ever have the privilege of knowing. I'm sure you would agree with me.

I always said that Walter steered a steady course, in part because he had as his first mate Betsy Cronkite. If there is an oxymoron in American life, it is "humble anchorman." We just don't exist, quite honestly. [laughter] And we count on our wives to kind of let the air out of us at the right time. And Meredith certainly plays that role in my life.

And her idol was Betsy Cronkite, for a couple of reasons. One was, when the Cronkites moved from a townhouse where they had lived for a long time into a high rise in New York, after about three months, Betsy said to a friend of hers, "You know, I kind of miss the old place." And the friend said, empathetically, "Well of course, Betsy. You raised your family there. And you had so many good years." And Betsy said, "It's nothing to do with all that. We had a backyard. I could bury all those damn plaques that Walter kept getting." [laughter]

Walter and Betsy and Meredith and I were at the Kentucky Derby one year. And it's kind of a death march when you have the kind of visibility that we do. And we were there for our affiliated stations. It begins with drinking on Thursday morning. And, by Saturday night, we're at a black tie dinner. And Walter came over to me and said, "How do we get out of here?"

And I said, "Well, I have two friends who are Louisville businessmen who have always wanted to take the two of us up in a hot air balloon. And you can only do that at dawn, so we'd have to leave now." He said, "Go make the arrangements." [laughter] And so I did. And at dawn the next morning, we were out on the outskirts of Louisville, Walter and I getting ready to get into the baskets to lift off in the hot air balloon. And half the town showed up, still in tuxedos, still with champagne glasses. [laughter]

And Walter got in his basket, and I got in mine. And we lifted off. And we had two-way radios. And the first voice I heard was Betsy Cronkite, after we got up to about 1,000 feet, saying, "Walter, we're down here on the ground dividing up your things." [laughter] "Do you still want that burial at sea?" [laughter]

And then my final favorite story about them came after Walter had retired for a couple of years and was in Yellowstone National Park, narrating a documentary. And typically of Walter, he was probably buying something for you. He went to the gift shop, standing in line, just like an ordinary citizen. And there was a woman standing behind him. And behind that woman was Betsy Cronkite.

The woman standing behind Walter just kept looking at him and looking at him. And finally, she couldn't contain herself. She tapped him on the shoulder. And he turned around. And she said to him, "Has anyone ever told you you look just like Walter Cronkite did before he died?" [laughter] Walter turned around and began to clear his throat. You know, his pride had been kind of injured. And now the woman is in a mild panic.

She turns to the woman behind her, not knowing that it's Betsy Cronkite, and says to Betsy, "Walter Cronkite is dead, isn't he?" [laughter] And Betsy looked off for a moment. And, as you will well know, his grandmother had a wonderful kind of crooked smile. And her eyes would crinkle. She smiled and looked at the woman. She said, "You know, if he isn't by now, the old SOB probably ought to be." [laughter] That is, part and parcel, of what made Walter a great man, was that he had someone who kind of helped steer him on a steady course.

I'll take just a few minutes of your time and talk (a) about how I wrote this book, and then (b) about the crap that unites so many of us here at the National Press Club. I have been at this for a half century, this next year. My marriage coincided with my beginning as a journalist, in a very modest way in Omaha, Nebraska.

And, in the course of the half century, I have won the lottery, both professionally and personally. I have a wonderful family. We have had extraordinary life, all of us. I have daughters of accomplishment and now four granddaughters. We only made girls in our family. [laughter] And I have had the privilege, as a journalist, to cover stories at the police precincts of Omaha and Atlanta, all the way to summit meetings in the Kremlin and in China.

And, in the course of that time, I have never lost my sense of wonder at the change that we have all experienced. And that change was for me, in some ways, distilled in June of 2009, when I was interviewing President Obama in Dresden, Germany, as he was preparing to go to Normandy for the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I had just been there the day before. As you might expect, I have spent a fair amount of time there, given the fact that I wrote about the greatest generation.

So, I was waiting to interview the new President of the United States, our first African American President, thinking about all the change that I had witnessed-- I was born in 1940-- standing in Dresden, which had been firebombed to the point that it was almost completely leveled at the end of World War II, then spent the next 40 years behind communist lines. And now the city was rising, Venus-like, out of the rubble of that time and the oppression of communist rule.

I had just come from Berlin, where I had been the night the wall came down. Berlin was the most exciting city in Central Europe, very cosmopolitan, vibrant once again. Again, in the course of my lifetime, it had been the capital of the most mendacious regime that anyone could possibly imagine, the headquarters of Hitler's Nazi Germany.

And then along came an African American President, whose father was born in Africa, and his mother came from here. And we began our exchange. And, when I mentioned to him that I had been in Berlin the night the wall came down, the only correspondent with live transmission I believe, the President looked at me and said, "Oh I know, Tom." He said, "I watched you. I was in law school at the time." I thought, "Oh my God. He was in law school." [laughter]

And I walked away from that interview, trying to make the measure of all the change that (a) I had witnessed, and (b) that we had all been through. And it began to resonate with me as I looked at my grandchildren. And I wondered, 50 years from now, what they would be saying about their time. And, most of all, what they would be saying about what we left them, what we created for them.

As many of you in the audience know, when you begin to write a book, you think you have a firm idea of where you're going to go. But you find that the journey really becomes an adventure because, with every page, as you finish it, you have new thoughts about the direction in which you want to go.

This book, for me, really came down to two questions. One was, what happened to the America I thought I knew? And the second question came from people that I encountered as I went across the country, who would say to me, “Mr. Brokaw, do you think my children will have a better life than I have had? I worry that they will not.” That question is at the heart of the American dream for so many families. They come here hoping that succeeding generations will have better lives than they have had.

Certainly that was the case in my family. My mother and father came out of the depths of the Great Depression. My dad dropped out of school when he was ten years old to go to work for a Swedish homesteader because he was a large, strong boy. And he became a master operator of heavy construction equipment and could find work. But it was not easy.

My mother’s family farm dried up and blew away from them. And it was seized by the bank in 1932. She was 16 when she graduated from high school, one of the brightest women I’ll ever know. And college cost \$100 dollars a year. And there was no way that she could possibly go. She wanted to be a journalist, it turns out. And so she lived out her life through me in so many ways, and has been a guide.

But I thought about the change in their lives, and then the change in our life. And my parents always saved for me to go to college, had hopes that their sons would have a better life than they will.

And, as I began to write the book, I thought, “Maybe we ought to recalibrate that question,” because I think, at the root of it, historically, has been the expectation that succeeding generations will live better economically. They’ll make more money. They’ll have better homes, more cars, more toys. Obviously, there is a finite capacity for all of that.

And so, what I attempt to do in this book, in many ways, is to get us collectively wherever we’re from, whatever we believe politically, or religiously, or culturally, to kind of have a national dialogue about what it is that we want to leave behind. And I think that you begin with that question of what kind of values do we want to leave behind? What kind of economic opportunity in the workplace do we want to leave behind? How do we expand the tolerance that took such a quantum leap forward as a result of Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement? How do we fit in to a smaller planet, with so many more people? How do we use this transformative technology that is available to us all at our fingertips now, to make this planet a better place?

And it was in that fashion that I launched this book. I began, really, with the need to do something desperately about American education. What is most encouraging to me is that that is a subject that is now on the table. And for too long, we had kind of a two-class system: those who could afford to move to the suburbs or send their children to private schools. The rest of America and the inner city and the lower parts of the socio-economic classes were stuck with a kind of one-size-fits-all warehousing education.

Education is the currency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At least we are talking about it and, here in the nation's Capital, attempting to do something about it as they are across the country. But we've got a long way to go. In China, every eighth grader is required to take math, physics and biology. In America, only 18 percent of high school students take those courses.

As long ago as 1996, I was reporting from Seoul, South Korea during the Olympics. And, because we did it in the middle of the night to meet the time requirement, time change requirements, I was there before dawn on a rooftop overlooking the courtyard of a junior high. And, before the sun came up, that courtyard was filled with the lights of flashlights. And I looked down the first day and couldn't figure out what was going on.

So I went down to look closer. And there were students in the courtyard doing their homework by flashlight, waiting for the doors to open, so that they could improve themselves. This is a country that, in the 1950s, was ravaged by war and had a kind of Stone Age agricultural economy. Now it's one of the industrial powerhouses in the world.

The President of Korea had a meeting with President Obama a year ago. And President Obama, to make conversation, said, "Tell me about your challenges in education." And the President of Korea looked at him and shook his head. He said, "My greatest challenge is that the parents want more from me, not less."

So I began to address that in this book, and the role that we can all play in it, in a variety of ways. Those of us of my generation ought to be thinking more actively about becoming tutors and becoming involved in the schools, not just of our grandchildren, but in our communities. There are some heartening developments, I think. I think the place of charter schools is important.

I believe that the combination, now, of what I call public/private partnerships, in many communities, where companies are getting involved because that's going to be their workforce and their customers, and they are trying to bring new resources to teaching. And we're finally beginning to have a national debate about what is an effective teacher? And, how do you build an effective school system? And make a transition, then, into what I call proportion in our lives.

I just had a fairly active discussion on NPR this morning, in which a caller called in to challenge me on the housing crisis, saying it was entirely the fault of Wall Street. In fact, Wall Street played an enormous role in the housing crisis, but it wasn't all Wall Street. People have to accept personal responsibility when they sign on the bottom line for a mortgage that they can't afford. And here in Washington, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac drove a lot of the stampede to people thinking that they could afford homes. Home ownership was going to be part of the American dream. But, unfortunately, it ignored a



lot of the financial reality that comes with that. And it continues to be a heavy burden in economic recovery in this country.

And then, the subject that will be of interest to so many of you, is this extraordinary change that is going on in the profession in which I've spent most of my life, journalism. I liken it to the second big bang, the impact of this new technology. We have created an entirely new universe out there. And we're, at the moment, trying to determine which of these planets will survive, and which will drift too close to the sun, which will merge with others to support life as we have known it as journalists, and how will it finally work itself out so there is a kind of orderly universe in which we can know where we're going.

At the same time, I find it exceptionally exciting. When audiences say to me, "What happened to the journalism I thought I used to know, when Walter and Chet and David and you and Dan and Peter were there?" I said, "I'm going to surprise you. There is a richer menu of information out there now than there ever has been. And it's available at a key stroke. But you can no longer be a couch potato. You have to get up in the morning and not just retrieve the daily newspaper and watch a little bit of the *Today Show*, and come home at night and watch one of the evening news broadcasts. To be a fully informed citizen, you've got to develop, if you will, a kind of personal filter system for the information that is coming at you all day long, with which you're being bombarded. What is reliable? What has integrity? What's the political motivation of this particular website?"

All the newspapers now have websites of one kind or another. And those are still works in transition. The same thing is true in my business, both over there and cable broadcast journalism. So we're working our way through it. The test, ultimately, always is, however, how reliable is the information? What's the integrity of what we're seeing and absorbing? And that's going to require more vigilance on the part of those of us who are on the receiving end of it. And we should have no less an expectation of that.

But the fact is, that the reach is so much greater. Even while traveling, I can get up in the morning, click on, read the *Financial Times* from London, read the latest release from the Saudi Foreign Ministry, go on the website of a council of foreign relations and see overnight developments in the international field, and read a couple of papers, to say nothing of the broad range of papers that are available to us in this country. I even read the *Yankton Press* and *Dakotan(?)* from time to time, just to see how the old high school football team is doing, and how my friends are getting along out there. And they've got a terrific website.

Finally, what is most important about this exceptional change that we're all witness to and we are a part of, as catalysts and as practitioners, is that the place of journalism will not and should not go away. It's critical to free people everywhere. And that cannot be lost in the debate about journalism. Free people still require a forum where they can retrieve information that is useful to them, to make decisions that affect their

lives and their nation and their communities. And we must kind of redouble our efforts to make sure that the culture of journalism remains intact and that its place in the public dialogue is prominent and defensible.

Just this past week, obviously, we have been witness, once again, to what I think is one of the fault lines of American journalism at the moment. And that is that it's become kind of an echo chamber. Something like the Herman Cain accusations and episode get into the system. And they squeeze out almost everything else. There's a kind of lemming-like journalistic patterns that develops, in which everyone chases the same story.

The fact of the matter is, that Herman Cain decided to run for President some time ago. Where were we in going back to find out what his history was? He had a fairly prominent role in America as President of the Restaurant Association. He was on the Board of the Readers Digest Association. There was a time, not so long ago, when anyone who declares for President can fully expect to be the object of a series of reports from *The Washington Post* or *The Wall Street Journal* or *The New York Times* or on television.

No longer. Now it's just everybody chasing candidates around the landscape or at the base. And then, when something happens, playing a giant game of "Gotcha." So I do think that that may be a place to begin. You're always going to have the horse race in American politics. You're always going to chase the scandals. But the American public deserves more from us, from these people who are stepping forward to running as President-- possibly President of the United States. They require a long, in depth examination of who they are, and an examination of what their policies are, across the board, republicans, democrats, and independents. That's the least that we owe the voting audience and the people who give us all the freedoms that we have in the First Amendment to the Constitution, freedom of the press.

Now, having said all of that, we can always expect that there will be a robust debate in this country that, in fact, some of the language that we're seeing now is reasonably mild even by contemporary standards. There is a new book out on the campaign of 1948.

I was reading passages from it last night. Harry Truman, "Give 'em Hell Harry," everyone remembers that campaign, at one point made a speech in which he compared Tom Dewey, in effect, to Hitler and Mussolini. And it was recorded and printed in that fashion. He said that, "Tom Dewey is just like what happened in Germany, in which the financial interests decided they had to have somebody represent them. And it was Adolf Hitler. And the same thing happened in Italy." Well, the Dewey people went ballistic. But Harry Truman stuck by his guns and continued to campaign in that fashion. So we have a rich tradition of that.

Moreover, here is something that may surprise a lot of people. Abraham Lincoln was, in a way, one of the first bloggers. [laughter] When he was a lawyer and active in Illinois politics, he wrote scathing criticisms of his political opponents under a pseudonym, scathing criticisms of them, that had very little basis in fact. [laughter] Very opinionated and very scurrilous. And, of course, because he was so well known, one of his opponents called him out and challenged him to a duel.

And, because he was challenged and a large gangly man, Abraham Lincoln decided he would choose broadswords. And they met just across the line, because duels were not permissible in Illinois. They met in Missouri at dawn. And, thank God, wiser heads prevailed and got the duel called off. But it was provoked by A. Lincoln, blogger, using someone else's name. So it's worth keeping all that in historical context.

And finally, I will share with you two stories at the conclusion of my book. One involves my grandchildren. Meredith and I are big outdoors people. We were backpackers, and I've climbed a lot. She's a big horse woman. We couldn't wait for the grandchildren to be just old enough so we could take them into the back country of Montana.

So we rushed it a little bit when they were just seven and five, our two oldest. We decided that they should go on their first camping trip. And we took them up a trail-less area into the wilderness near our ranch, to a very back country, very rudimentary cabin that's on our property, with a little bit of whining on their part about the insects and how hard the trip was. But we got there, had a big cookout.

And, at the end of the cookout, Meredith, who was called "Nan" by her grandchildren, said to them, "Okay, Claire and Meredith, you're going to sleep in the cabin." It was just a tiny cabin where cowboys would hang out during roundup time. "And Tom and I will be just outside in our sleeping bags." And we gave them little headlamps and tucked them into their sleeping bags. And you could see that they had a lot of questions, but they weren't raising them.

And so, Meredith and I went out and got in our sleeping bags just outside the tent. And we could hear a kind of whispered, urgent conversation from inside. And the youngest of the two suddenly came out and stood on the porch, and looked at the two of us and said to Meredith, "Nan, we need an adult in here now." [laughter] I think that may be a metaphor for the country. [laughter]

And then finally, the anecdote that follows that is that I always learned something from the wild, from nature, when I'm in Montana. Every year there is some kind of an enduring lesson that I learn from the animal life or from the storms that blow through or the floods that we have or the severe winters.

The most memorable one for me came about four years ago, when our river was very high, almost at flood stage because of snow runoff. And I went to a high point

overlooking the river that was bordered by a conifer grove. And then, on the other side, to get to the grassy pastures and the range of our ranch, there were thick rows of hawthorn bushes.

And out of the conifer grove came about 12 elk cows and their newborn calves. And they stood and looked at me. I was about 200 yards away at that point and decided I was no threat. So the mother cows led these newborn calves into this very, very high and strong raging river. And they swam across. And the calves were having a hard time thrashing their way through the hawthorn bushes.

They all made it except one. And he was swept downstream. Now I'm thinking, "What do I do here?" But, on his own, he found an eddy, which is a back current, and got up onto a sandbar, and walked back up a little farther, and was on the far bank. The rest of the herd was across the river. And they were waiting patiently. And he tried again and failed a second time. And then he got back on the sandbar and tried a third time and failed again.

Now, I could barely breathe watching all of this. But, as God is my witness, after the third time, he stood on that sandbank trembling. Across the way, his mother separated herself from the herd, walked down to the edge of the river, looked at him, and nodded her majestic head, waded into the river, nuzzled him some, and then led him upstream to a safer place where they both got across, while the rest of the herd waited for them. And then they moved on to greener pastures.

Our country is at flood stage. We need to find a way that we can navigate these rivers together and find our ways to higher ground. Thank you all very much.

[applause]

**MARK HAMRICK:** Thank you very much, Tom. And it's a real pleasure to have you here today, a lot of smiling faces in our audience. So, using your term, "The greatest generation" as a basis, how would you categorize the current generation?

**TOM BROKAW:** Well, in terms of the young people coming of age?

**MARK HAMRICK:** Yeah, or-- [simultaneous conversation] Yeah, maybe both, maybe--

**TOM BROKAW:** The boomers, all right. I'm not a boomer. I am a member of the so-called "Silent Generation." I was born in 1940. And we're small, because there was not a lot of births going on during the war, obviously. And I've been fascinated by the baby boomers because (a) I was just close enough to them that we shared a lot of interests. And I covered them as a reporter. And I call that the "unresolved generation." We don't-- I don't think that they have fully resolved who they want to be and how they want to be remembered.

The current generation coming of age now are called, broadly speaking, “The Millennials.” And they are beginning to get a subset because they have been so chastened by what’s happening economically. A lot of them have moved back home, not because they’re slackers, because they can’t find a job and they can’t afford housing. So marketers are beginning to call them “neo-frugalists.” They are spending their money much more carefully than their parents did. And they’re making decisions of kind of a week or a day at a time, spending a lot of time online talking to everybody else. And they’re skeptical about a lot of the institutions that we have all taken for granted, including corporations and what kind of job security they have. So that’s how I would characterize the three of them.

**MARK HAMRICK:** Okay. We’ve dealt with some similar themes in recent Luncheons, including one where Ken Burns was here to talk about his new three-part series, *Prohibition*. And he uses that as sort of a fulcrum to talk about a divisiveness in U.S. history. How would you place this period we’re witnessing right now, relative to other such periods, throughout our entire American history?

**TOM BROKAW:** Well, I think we don’t know yet. You always need a little more perspective and a little more distance from what we’re going through. It does seem, at the moment, that this is-- and we know this for a fact-- this is a very difficult time, in part because the old rules don’t seem to apply.

I was with a group of very sophisticated economists and CEOs in late ’09. Almost to a man, they said the recovery would be well underway by the fourth quarter of ’10 because the amount of stimulus the government was going to unleash. Everybody underestimated the depth of the housing crisis and the systemic quality of unemployment in this country, about companies learning how to do their job and make money with fewer workers.

Moreover, everybody also underestimated the kind of ruthlessness and what turned out to be the inefficiency of Wall Street, with its instruments, in which they were just trading money. We’ve got 40 percent of our economy, now, I think, is made up of financial services. Doesn’t make anything, they just trade a lot of instruments.

And then finally, everyone underestimated the connectivity of a global economy. Whoever thought that when Greece got a cold, we can get the flu? But that’s really what’s happened, is that everything is so tied together anymore, that it races around the world in an extraordinary hurry.

**MARK HAMRICK:** On the political climate, you know, basically we started to see some interesting things happen with the Tea Party Movement, seems to have now been garnered a response from the Occupy Wall Street people. In terms of the political environment that we’re in, and obviously, you know, you sort of came of age, in terms of

your career, during Watergate-- that was a rough time as well-- how does this feel to you now? And, going back to the time, the reference with Abraham Lincoln?

**TOM BROKAW:** Well, you know, 1968 was a very difficult time. This-- This country was deeply, deeply divided by the war, primarily, and by the counterculture, and what was going on in the streets of Chicago and other places. And the war was a real cancer in American life. We lost 16,000 people in Vietnam-- think about that-- in that one year alone. Lyndon Johnson was forced to step down. Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy were both assassinated.

And yet, we had an economic underpinning in which things were pretty good economically. Even the people who were in the streets had a home to go back to, or probably could go get a job if they chose to, because there was a real demand for the workplace.

What's changed it now is that there is so much economic uncertainty. And that causes exceptional anxiety. If you take the people who have a home that's in foreclosure or in danger of it or the value of it has gone way down compared to their mortgage, that represents, in most instances, a great bulk of their net worth. And they can't see, looking out, how they're ever going to get out from under that.

And then you have elder workers who have lost their jobs, or have been furloughed. And they don't have a retirement program anymore. And what's going to happen to them? We had a pretty lively debate on NPR because I have been critical of the AARP in its new ad, saying, "We're the AARP. We're 50 million strong. Don't cut our benefits. Remember, we vote." I think it would have been more useful for the AARP to say, "A lot of our members need all of these benefits. We, however, would like to have a dialogue. Reach out to us. We know about entitlement programs. And we want to be a part of this discussion." Because, if everyone just retreats to their corners and issues threats, I don't know how we get downstream.

The fact is, Medicare needs to be reformed, structurally and otherwise. Social Security cannot-- cannot be sustained at its current levels unless we make some significant changes in it. We made changes during the Reagan years. It's time for some other changes now. And that's what I think organizations, including the AARP, but others ought to be saying. Count us in. Bring us to the table. We've got some thoughts on this.

**MARK HAMRICK:** Are all Americans, or many Americans, guilty of that same issue, failing to be willing to make a significant sacrifice like the greatest generation?

**TOM BROKAW:** No. I think, more and more that they are. Here is what I do think, however. The national debt is a critical issue. It's going to be left behind for our children and grandchildren to pay off the debt. And it's going to make life that much more expensive at every level in this country.

But, for most Americans, they can't touch it or feel it or smell it. So it's just kind of out there. And, if things are going okay for them, they're not going to worry about it very much. If the national debt came with a hot, dry wind that blew in your face when you got up in the morning, to remind you that it exists there, or when you stepped out the door, there was this enormous mound reminding you of how much of that national debt you were going to have to pay off at some point, it had a kind of tactile quality about it, I think we'd have a greater sense of urgency about it among the masses.

**MARK HAMRICK:** What is your sense of optimism or pessimism as to whether these much needed solutions can actually come down the pike?

**TOM BROKAW:** Well, I'm a product of America, so the glass is always half full for me. And we have the greatest education institutions in the world, even those that are stressed at the moment. And the genius of this immigrant nation is that everyone is always coming here wanting to work harder and fulfill the American dream and to have ambition.

We've just been witnessing, the last couple of weeks, to the enormous outpouring of tributes to Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs and Bill Gates and Sergei Brennan, Laurie Page at Google, and all the others, they invented this technology in America. They changed the world. And, if you go to Silicon Valley, you find all these bright young Americans that we would once, a long time ago, dismiss as just computer geeks, out there in Silicon Valley. By the way, they don't have a recession there. Their economy is pumping. So, it's that kind of American inventiveness that, if you give them running room, that they can get the job done.

But I do think that there are some fundamental structural problems with the country at the moment that we have to address, because we're competing, as I said earlier, against countries that now have an open playing field, in which they're preparing for their future by inventing their own new institutions, and changing their laws to adapt to the reality. We're living, as I said earlier, in an analog way, but it's a digital world.

**MARK HAMRICK:** A question from the audience says, and I'm just quoting here, you sound very down on public education. Surely you can't mean that every public school is failing its students.

**TOM BROKAW:** No, no, I'm not down on public education. In fact, in the book, I pay tribute to it. I just think that public education, like every other institution in American life, has to look at how it can renew itself. I pay tribute to a woman in Fayetteville, North Carolina, public school superintendent, who got very concerned about the gap between Hispanic and African American students and her white students. When she looked into it, it was mostly because of absenteeism. So many of the lower socio-economic classes had no parent at home when they left for school in the morning or when they got home. So they skipped school.

So she put on a real campaign to get kids back into the classroom, persuaded her teachers, and got some local money to have a sixth day of classes on Saturdays, gave out her telephone number as the other teachers did. And they've turned this school around. I work with a school in the South Bronx, in New York, an elementary school. A principal in a public school called me up and said, "I need some help. I'd like you to see our school."

I went up there, and it was one of those wonderful schools that was built in 1955, structurally very sound, second floor, large room, completely empty. And I said, "What's this?" She said, "It should be a library, but it's not. We don't have anything to fill it up with." So I helped her raise some money. She was very resourceful on her own.

That room now is filled with computers and electronic books and other kinds of books. And she keeps it open until seven o'clock at night as a community center for the single parents who can come home from work, go there with their children, and learn together. And a lot of the teachers are volunteering to stay afterwards. It's that kind of enterprise that will be the saving grace of public education in the country. I've got a lot of other examples in the book as well. But I encourage you to buy it and read them that way. [laughter]

**MARK HAMRICK:** From the head table, we have a question. What do you think about the impact of the Citizens United decision on elections? And what do you think that will do about the level of argument in politics and in campaigns?

**TOM BROKAW:** Well, I have been a big critic, for a long time, of big money in politics. And that took it a whole different level. Now, having said that, I am not enough of a legal expert to say that the Supreme Court was wrong, because I do think that institutions and even corporations have a right to play their part in the American political system.

And, before we had Citizens United, we had lots of other money that was pouring into the system. And what I've discovered-- I have been covering this particular part of American politics since I began. I remember in California, I went to the Secretary of State's Office after a very expensive Senate race, to look at the records about who was giving money. And they could file by submitting all the names, but with no space between the names, and one line bumped up against the other. So it was almost impossible to read pages and pages of documents.

Money is the mother's milk of politics. And so many people in this country who are not directly involved in the culture have come to accept that. And it's very hard to get the public aroused about the impact of money. They are generally inclined to say, "It's always been that way. It's probably always going to be that way."



But now we're talking about numbers that are unimaginable. I mean, we're going to spend a couple billion dollars on the Presidential election next year, at a time when that money could be used in so many other ways in this country, to move the country forward.

**MARK HAMRICK:** Is the impact of that to push the people away from their government?

**TOM BROKAW:** It is. I think that I came-- I went across the country in '09 on Highway 50. And I came back with two conclusions. One was that about half the country was ticked off in a half-cocked position. And they just didn't believe anything that they were hearing anymore. And that-- I really believe that was the root of the Tea Party Movement.

The other half of the country was really just worrying about holding their families and their communities and their businesses together. And they had kind of given up on Washington. A lot of them had voted for the President. They were independents or moderate republicans. And they felt a kind of sense of betrayal that he wasn't as aware of what they were going through out there in the heartland.

I think most of all, people just don't feel connected to their Congressman or senator in the way that they once did, because they lead such different lives now than they did. I mean, you've got an entire industry over here on K Street. You know how much money is spread around. Look at the amount of money that is being used, now, to attack the new regulations on Wall Street. Every bank and financial institution got a high powered lawyer in there. And we haven't finished the debate on healthcare, either promoting it or taking it apart. And that will be driven so much, not from the patient population as it will be by the special interest.

**MARK HAMRICK:** You're almost recognized in current time more as an author-- and that's the reason why you're here today-- than as a broadcast journalist. Talk about the craft of writing for a book as opposed to preparing for on-air. How do they compare? How do they differ?

**TOM BROKAW:** Well, broadcast journalism is, you know, is short-form. And books are long-form. So that was a transition for me. I have a number of friends who are literary novelists. Tom McGuane is one of them. Jim Harrison is another one. And we've talked about the craft of writing Carl Hyacinth is one of my favorite friends, and also one of the wittiest guys who is writing today.

And we've talked about it. And I said, you know, my problem is always writing long, you know, keeping track of everything. Because I'm used to short narratives, either an op-ed page piece, or a magazine piece of some kind. But a book is a really long journey. And they said, "Well, there are no pills that you can take. You just have to find your way through it."

But I find it very gratifying. And, what I like about it is the permanence of it. Walter Isaacson and I had a conversation the other day about print versus electronic books. And Walter said something, I think, that was very perceptive. He said, "I'm trying to hang on to first edition copies of books in print that I like, because I think 20 years from now, I know where they're going to be. I'm not sure what's going to happen to my electronic books that I'm storing on my iPad or on my computer." And, you know, I think that that's a fairly astute observation.

I find that my grandchildren still love the tactile experience. The kids all read books with books in their hands. You know, they love the idea of books. And they go straight through them. They'll pick them up and read them. But they're not reading electronically as much as they are-- as they are a book with a binding on it and with the printed page.

**MARK HAMRICK:** Let's talk about the point at which you were NBC Nightly News anchor. You know, you had rivals at CBS-- Dan Rather, Peter Jennings. You talked about them earlier.

**TOM BROKAW:** Is that right? I didn't--

**MARK HAMRICK:** We do have some young people in the audience who might not be as aware of that as people like I am.

**TOM BROKAW:** It was only six years ago. [laughter]

**MARK HAMRICK:** Some have thought that that sort of-- the stature of the network anchor can never be recaptured again. Do you think that's true?

**TOM BROKAW:** Well here is something I would like to remind people of. Bill O'Reilly gets a lot of attention because he's the most popular commentator in cable news. And he likes to talk about that, and that's fine [laughter] as the number one cable news program. He has half the audience of Scott Pelley, who is ranked third in the evening news broadcast.

These evening news broadcasts, on a combined basis, on a nightly basis, deliver about 20 million viewers. Who in this room wouldn't like to have circulation of 20 million? It still has a lot of tonnage attached to it. Now gratefully, Brian has done a great job, and he's number one. Diane is number two. But it is more competitive.

The thing that we worry most about, there is a decline from year to year, but most of all we worry about is the demographics of it. The audiences tend to be older. We don't get as many young people because they can get it from so many other places. So we have a whole other nightly news that comes on after Brian signs off online, on the website, so you can get additional information.

And I think it's that mix that will probably prevail for a good long time. You don't want to overstate. Look, Dan and Peter and I all thought we were grand, just like I did with Rush. But we weren't perfect either. What changed for us, which was so exciting, is that we all grew up as correspondents, as reporters. And, when we got to those chairs, satellite technology arrived simultaneously.

So we could be anchors and reporters. We could get on the plane and go to the Philippines or Tiananmen Square or to Russia or Czechoslovakia, when everything was changing. We could be in South Africa or the night the Berlin Wall came down, and report live from those sites, and added a whole other dimension to it.

**MARK HAMRICK:** Do you think the nightly newscast will survive 20 years from now?

**TOM BROKAW:** My guess is that it will. It constantly has to adapt to what's going on. And it will probably take on some new forms by then. And, what I think is, that it will probably have many parts to it. There will be an on the air part, an online part. And they'll all be complementary, going on at the same time. And you'll probably be able to see it on your iPad in whatever form that is. I mean you'll be able to just dial it up, even on an airplane. I mean, we all have gotten used to the idea, now, of getting on Jet Blue and watching satellite television all across the country, right?

**MARK HAMRICK:** Mm-hmm.

**TOM BROKAW:** Why couldn't we just have the nightly news available to us, either on a PDA or on an iPad of some kind? I think there's a good possibility of that. and then, complementary information that is off to the side, statistical analysis of what we've just reported on.

**MARK HAMRICK:** Earlier you talked about, you know, the media should have done its due diligence with Herman Cain six months ago. Is the media, as a whole, newspapers, radio, television, missing a lot of stories because of the downsizing in all those operations and the attention to just trying to keep up with real time news?

**TOM BROKAW:** I don't think it has anything to do with downsizing. I mean it only took Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, two guys, to bring down Richard Nixon, two reporters who went out there and went through card files, and knocked on doors. And that's how you do real reporting.

And actually, ProPublica, which is Paul Steiger's new outfit, has won two Pulitzers in, what, six years or seven years, with a staff of 34. Our Bloomberg representative was telling me you have how many people in the office?

\_\_\_: Over 200.

**TOM BROKAW:** Over 200 people in the Bloomberg Bureau. Bloomberg didn't exist when I was a reporter in Washington. So there is a lot of fire power out there. It's just how we use it. That's the real issue. We ought not to become just an echo chamber.

Let me just say one other thing about that. I was on Jon Stewart last night promoting my book, *The Daily Show*. And before I got on, the first half of the show, Jon's staff, which is so good at this, did the best job I've seen all week on the Herman Cain story, of putting it in perspective, of getting the archival information, of tracking the different things that he said along the way, and then putting in context, as well, some of the defenses of him.

There is this debate that was going on, Ann Coulter saying, "Our blacks are better than their blacks. And that's the reason that there is such a dispute about this." And Jon Stewart, in his own inevitable way, went right after that. And then, at one point, someone was suggesting that this was just an allegation against Herman Cain. And it was recent. Jon said, "It happened in 1990. It wasn't an allegation. In fact, there was a settlement made." That's the kind of reporting that we ought to be seeing, frankly, on all the cable outlets, and all the news, traditional news outlets. Because there wasn't anything loaded about all that. He was just doing a factual recitation of what had happened.

**MARK HAMRICK:** Well Tom, we're almost out of time. If you'll just allow me for a moment, I have a couple of last-minute housekeeping items to take care of. I'd like to remind our audience about some upcoming Luncheon speakers. A member of your NBC Universal family, on December 14<sup>th</sup>, Jim Cantore, the on-camera meteorologist will be here to talk about extreme weather and the job to cover that. And, between then and now, the U.S. Postmaster General, Patrick Donahue, will be able to address our audience about the crisis that's really affecting the U.S. Postal Service.

**TOM BROKAW:** Ask him if he can keep the Post Office open in Big Timber, Montana. [laughter]

**MARK HAMRICK:** Here. Here is a card, okay. [laughter] Now, because you do so much traveling, Tom, I know you have been at this podium before, but we have a new thank you gift, as small as it is. And that is the new NPC travel mug, as a token of our appreciation.

**TOM BROKAW:** Thank you very much.

**MARK HAMRICK:** One more question. So the final question is, as we mentioned at the beginning, you'll be celebrating your 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary next year. So what is the secret to such a long, happy marriage?

**TOM BROKAW:** When my daughter first got married, the oldest, my wife went to her and said, "Always make sure that you have your own space." And on one of

our anniversaries, Jennifer got up and said, “I thought that was just great advice. Then I realized my mother has 5,000 acres of Montana. That’s a lot more space than I’m ever going to have in a marriage.” [laughter]

I do think that space, however you want to define it, is important. We’re devoted to each other. We complement each other in so many ways. I say in the book, I’m in the vanity business. I’m kind of a cowboy, in terms of my impulsiveness. My wife is a master at the fine craft. She’s a great musician. She’s a wonderful horse women, competitively, not just riding out across the prairie. She’s an expert bridge player. She knits all this stuff for our grandchildren.

You know, I am at the other end of that spectrum. I’m out there, you know, raising hell as a journalist, and doing the kinds of things that I like. And we fit together, in a way. She still laughs at my jokes, which is an important part of it. And I still count on her to kind of have the long view. And, most of all, what has been so important to our marriage, is that I am in awe of how she has been a role model for our daughters by just being there for them and allowing them to develop as individual women, without imposing her own self on them. So, it’s worked out very well.

The fact is that we met when we were 15. And that’s-- that’s the equivalent of a moon shot, that you can make a marriage last for 50 years, when you met when you were 15 years old, in Yankton, South Dakota. I dare say I’ve met a lot of other people in the world. And there is no one else that ever occurred to me that I could ever be married to. And I’d like to think she feels the same way. I think that’s it.

[applause]

**MARK HAMRICK:** The name of the book, *The Time of Our Lives*. Thank you very much, Tom.

[applause]

**MARK HAMRICK:** Thank you all for coming here today. I’d like to also thank our National Press Club staff, including our Library and Broadcast Center, for organizing today’s event. And here is a reminder, you can find out more information about the National Press Club, as well as the National Press Club Journalism Institute, on our website. And, if you would like a copy of today’s program, you can check out our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). Thank you. And we’re adjourned.

[gavel]

[applause]

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