

Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

“Good Night and Good Luck” ^[1]

The flight purser came back to where Fred Friendly was seated to tell him that his friend Edward R. Murrow had died an hour earlier. The plane had just cleared the Irish coast on a flight from London to New York, and the news about Murrow had been radioed from Shannon control with instructions to tell Friendly. It was April 27, 1965.

Friendly recalled in a Columbia Records album we later prepared about Murrow, that “the message was only confirmation of what Ed and his friends had expected for months.” Edward R. Murrow smoked three packs of unfiltered Camel cigarettes every day, and died at age 57 from cancer that spread from his lungs to his brain.

I thought of Friendly’s remarks when I watched the movie *Good Night, and Good Luck*, which has been nominated for six Academy Awards. [George Clooney](#), who directed the movie and plays the role of Fred Friendly, does not entirely capture the dynamism of the real Fred Friendly I knew, nor David Straithairn the Edward R. Murrow that no one could ever duplicate.

I was not with Murrow and Friendly and their *See it Now* staff on March 9, 1954, when their program took on [Senator Joseph McCarthy](#), who was ruining lives in his witch hunt for suspected Communists. I was in college, but had my sights on CBS News long before I graduated.

And because I did wind up at CBS News - I was on staff from the late 1950s through the entire next decade - the movie resonates with me in certain ways.

My wife and I identify with two CBS News staffers portrayed in the movie. *See it Now* producer and reporter Joe Wershba, played by Robert Downey Jr., and writer Shirley Wershba, played by Patricia Clarkson, had married but tried to keep it secret because CBS News policy at the time forbade married couples from working in the same company division.

Anne Glassman, a production assistant at CBS News, and I, a writer and producer, married while we were both at CBS News in 1961, and, like Joe Wershba, I stayed on at the network because my salary was greater than Anne’s, a situation more commonplace then than now in the business world.

Friendly became President of CBS News in 1964, and every story had to be airtight accurate, with all the facts on the table and no secrets, the way it was when he and Murrow went after Senator McCarthy almost 10 years earlier.

Friendly had a *New Yorker* magazine cartoon framed on the wall near his desk, that he would point to when necessary, depicting a young blond woman, together with a man marooned on an island with a single palm tree. She says “I’ll know. That’s who!”

No con job from a reporter or producer was permitted by Friendly, who wanted nothing kept from him. As he paced the room like a bear, he would confront a producer after something

went wrong on the news, pounding his fist into his palm. "I want to know the name of the telephone man in the manhole who cut that.... telephone line," he would bellow. He didn't whisper, wimp, and wisecrack like George Clooney's Fred Friendly, he would get right in your face.

I used to watch Murrow nervously pump his foot while reading the news, as David Strathairn did in the movie, but Murrow had a rich timber in his voice unmatched by Strathairn, whose head is too small and body too slight to have captured Murrow's commanding presence. No actor could do a perfect Murrow, who, as Time magazine noted in a cover story about Murrow, reads "like he knows the worst but will try not to mention it."

But perhaps even Murrow, whose salary was somewhere in excess of \$300,000 per year, would have done a double take upon learning that NBC's Katie Couric is paid \$15,000,000 annually.

Shortly after Murrow died, Friendly asked me to "prepare" a record album of Murrow's wartime broadcasts, as I did with CBS News colleague Sheldon Hoffman. Friendly intentionally used the word "prepare," because Murrow was the producer of the album, he said, and we were simply preparing his material. Friendly wanted the recordings to be played in "their original 15 or 20 minutes because that's what brought their original impact."

While collecting Murrow's broadcasts over a period of more than a year, mostly from BBC archives and old glass-based record disks at CBS, I came across his earliest radio reports from London, where he had been sent by CBS to set up its business office in Europe in the mid-1930s. He was not initially sent to do news broadcasts, which he began only as Hitler invaded Europe.

In his first reports, Murrow did not sound anything like the Murrow that would report later from London about the war to audiences in the United States and Britain. He had received voice coaching critiques from a former drama instructor at the University of North Carolina, who taught him how to dramatically pause: "This – is London," and "Good night – and good luck."

In the Columbia album that we prepared, "A Reporter Remembers," which Friendly insisted that each new CBS news correspondent listen to in its entirety before filing his or her first piece, Friendly wrote that "Murrow hated obituaries, yet to my certain knowledge would have liked to be judged by the record of his reporting. This album is part of that record." Murrow would not have much cared that his record album reports won a Grammy award, but it may have caused him to nod that his war reports likely influenced younger CBS correspondents who came on after he died.

After Friendly resigned from CBS News as its president in 1966 because the network cut away from Senate hearings on Vietnam for re-runs of "I Love Lucy," he tried to right a wrong that is all-too apparent in *Good Night and Good Luck*; there were few minorities on the news staff.

Friendly became a journalism professor at Columbia University in New York City, where he would attract promising young Black and Hispanic news broadcasters and help to teach them new skills. He would call me at CBS each semester with a list of his most promising young students, and I would come over to interview them, several of whom we hired for staff

positions at WCBS-TV, the network's flagship station in New York City.

Good Night and Good Luck is an impressive effort and an important story, but it does not do justice to its main characters or their invaluable contribution to the news business; it is unlikely that any film could.
