



Horton's

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The Courage of Both Doubts & Convictions

By Steve Horton

In the realm of commentary, no one had a more far-reaching or influential venue than Eric Sevareid, a famed TV and radio correspondent from an earlier generation. For 14 years, beginning in 1963 until his retirement in 1977, he would offer his insights to on current events, policy considerations, and other matters of import during the CBS Evening News. Millions of viewers knew who he was, and listened.

With his mane of grey hair, Nordic good looks, and a voice laden with gravitas, his spoken essays, elegant and succinct in tone, seemed like pronouncements from 'on high.' Yet hearing a few of them again these many years later (thanks to You Tube), as well as watching a couple of post-retirement interviews when he was the one being questioned, I was reminded that his approach to opinion was more nuanced than authoritative.

He said as much when, in his farewell broadcast, he spoke of the need "to retain the courage of our doubts, as well as of our convictions, in this world of dangerously passionate certainties."

Having dabbled in newspaper commentary, in addition to my other journalistic chores, for what's now become a good many years, I found this statement reassuring—an affirmation that taking a more measured approach might have merit.

That world of "passionate certainties" now dominates the landscape, exemplified by the chattering class of self-sure men and women who populate the cable TV news stations and talk radio, where the declarative opinion reigns. Judgments are offered as if chiseled in stone and brought down from Mount Sinai, where attacks to any and all opposing views are the norm, where the *modus operandi* is to never concede or equivocate, and where doubt is considered a fatal flaw.

WELL, I POSSESS MY SHARE OF OPINIONS—an even a few convictions—of what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, advisable or ill advised, and a sign of prudence or the height of folly—on all kinds of topics. I'll confess as well that I am pleased when others agree with me and might feel a twinge of annoyance when countered by an opposing view.

Yet I remind myself that in this effort to persuade others, I'm counting on the reader to keep an open mind and be willing to listen. As such, it's only fair that I extend the same courtesy. A dialogue takes at least two people. The job of commentary, it seems to me, ought to be more challenging than climbing on a

soapbox and spouting off whatever comes to mind. While, in most instances, it involves rendering a judgment, hopefully the conclusion is given after marshalling evidence and sound reasoning on its behalf.

At times, a bit of equivocation is refreshing. An analysis of the pros and cons of opposing sides can be instructive, minus any final verdict. So, too, is a willingness to explore the differing possibilities that are in play, with an acknowledgement that other perspectives exist—even some of equal validity.

Admittedly, this attempt at broader understanding and a willingness to question prevailing assumptions (your own included) might not be greeted with applause. The choir to which you preach—with whom you share certain beliefs—might prefer a firmer, less nuanced stance. Might prefer the partisan warrior to the tentative observer. And as for those holding the differing viewpoints? Well, don't expect any thanks. They already figure they're right.

But this is the risk taken by having “the courage of your doubts.

Still, there are matters where the ‘con’ is too distasteful, or where the ‘differing possibilities’ are too abhorrent, for the measured, dispassionate examination. In those cases, the exclamation mark is demanded, and so the commentator utilizes all the tools at hand to make the necessary point.

The effort might be meant by slings and arrows, the viewpoint roundly criticized by its intended targets. On occasion, the stand taken may very well run against popular opinion or conventional wisdom.

But then this is the taken by having “the courage of your convictions.”