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Tom Brokaw Shares Insights on Today's Topics

Tom Brokaw reports from "on the road" during his recent special series on Highway 50.

There may be no better person to put today's societal challenges and opportunities in perspective than Tom Brokaw. He self-describes his role for more than four decades as capturing the mood of the American people.

In his 2002 book, "A Long Way from Home: Growing Up in the American Heartland," Brokaw wrote: "The world in which I work and live is a long way from home, but the early bearings I took as a child on the prairie (in South Dakota), surrounded by working people and the communities they established, often in difficult circumstances, have been a steadying and reassuring presence."

A 10-minute telephone conversation in early June with Brokaw brought out the following astute observations. You will have the opportunity to hear much more from him directly on November 9 as he gives the keynote address at the Indiana Chamber's 21st Annual Awards Dinner.

BizVoice®: Does the Gulf oil spill compare to stories you've covered?

Tom Brokaw: "What I've been saying is, and I feel very strongly that this is the case, this is a metaphor for our times. Everything now is so much larger and so much more complex and when something goes wrong, we see a disaster of a magnitude that we have not witnessed before. And I really do think that it feeds the national anxiety."

"I have been all across the country in the last few years. I've been doing documentaries on the Baby Boomers and Highway 50. And if there is a consistent theme, it's people just don't believe what they're hearing from institutions, from Congress, from the White House, from Wall Street, and they're just going about their business and trying to get the jobs done as best they know how."

"And this oil spill is emblematic of that. We were told it wouldn't be much and it wouldn't hurt the environment and they had it under control, and now it's day 50 and they're still talking about August before they get it under control."

BV: The Highway 50 and Baby Boomer projects – describe your motivations.

TB: "I've been a national correspondent for more than 45 years. And I have strongly believed in

By Tom Schuman

the wisdom of the American people beyond the Beltway and beyond the outlines of the island of Manhattan. It has always been our greatest reserved strength when we are greater than the sum of our parts.

“During this economic downturn, so much was called into question about values, savings, risks and integrity – I wanted to hear what the American people thought about it. So I went out across the country, and I found it reassuring in that as they always have when there is a crisis in our lives, people at the local level pull together and find a solution. And they don’t get up every morning and put on a red state T-shirt or blue state T-shirt. What they do is they say, ‘Hey, we’ve got a problem here to solve, and we better get on with it here.’

“And I found that across the country, but I still think there is a disconnect between what goes on in Washington and what goes on on Main Street.”

BV: The depth of mistrust and partisanship in Washington – is it deeper than in previous times?

TB: “Yeah, it is. It is. It’s hard to get exactly at the roots of it. First of all, all of the special interest groups across the political spectrum from left to right and back again are much better organized than they have been in the past. Then, they have the instrumentation to respond very quickly on the blog or on web sites to light up, if you will, their constituents and put pressure on congressmen. I mean every congressional office now has someone just monitoring what the blogs are saying, what they are saying about the congressman or congresswoman or the senator, and they’re responding to that. So there’s no breathing space, if you will.

“In Indiana, you have Senator Bayh retiring in part because he can’t deal with the climate any more. Whatever you feel about his politics, here was a bright, dedicated young man, a second-generation senator, and he was worn out by it.”

BV: When reporting on stories of human suffering, what message did you try to convey?

TB: “What I was trying to do was cover the story the best I could, but I was always interested in the resilience of the American people.

“I was talking to a friend yesterday about the Murrah Federal Building being blown up in Oklahoma. That was a wholly unexpected terrorist attack, homegrown in the heartland, youngsters in the nursery for God’s sakes were killed. And when I went down there, I was stunned by the magnitude of the destruction and reassured by the response of the people of Oklahoma City and the state about how they just quickly



Brokaw through the years: (top) with NBC colleagues Cassie Mackin, David Brinkley and John Chancellor as he covered the 1976 presidential election; (middle) reporting live from Jerusalem in 1987; (bottom) as the only correspondent with a live satellite feed from the Brandenburg Gate during the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

turned to healing the physical and emotional wounds that came with that catastrophe. And after that, I ended up writing some stuff for them for their books and so on about it – this is who we are, and I’ve always felt that way.”

BV: Is the public better served today by the media or with the way things were in the past?

TB: “You know, I am asked this question wherever I go. And I honestly believe the public is better served by having more choices.



John Wooden, flanked by basketball greats Oscar Robertson and Larry Bird during a ceremony at Conseco Fieldhouse honoring Indiana's 50 greatest basketball players, earned the deep respect of Brokaw for what he did off the court (photo by Pacers Sports & Entertainment).

I strongly believe that. But, the public can no longer be a couch potato and just sit at home and watch – and by the way when I began there were only two networks (doing the news); ABC was not much of a player. But it was Chet Huntley and David Brinkley for NBC and Walter Cronkite for CBS. And people could go home, as we did in our household at 5:30 at night in the Midwest, and turn on – we were an NBC family. There were others that were CBS families. And then you watched the *Today* show in the morning; that was the only choice you had.

“Now you’ve got all these choices, and you’ve got choices on the television screen and on your computer screen. And you just have to be much more proactive as a news consumer to test the integrity of what you’re seeing or reading, to question the credibility of it, to wonder about the sources and the motivation of the people who are printing it or putting it online. So I tell audiences everywhere you’ve got to get as involved in making a determination about the news that you are getting as you would about buying a shirt or a camera or a car. You bring intelligence to other consumer activities that you have; you have to do that with news as well.”

BV: Are you seeing people do that?

TB: “I guess what I am seeing frankly is that a lot of people are still, and I am part of this, we are all still adjusting to this enormous change in what I call the new big bang: the creation of the second universe dominated by various online sources. We’re trying to figure out which ones will survive and which ones won’t, which ones we can count on, which ones have real value and which ones are simply entertaining.”

BV: John Wooden passed away a few days ago. Who are some of the people you’ve interviewed who have left a lasting impression on you beyond the story?

TB: “Well, you know Coach Wooden was right at the top of those ranks. I lived in Los Angeles when he had his great run. I was there from 1966 to 1973, and my closest friends were UCLA graduates.

I was thinking about this the other day. The cherished moment was when they secured their season tickets every year. And I was able to go to the games, and I got to know him a little bit. And the last few years whenever there would be a birthday celebration, I would be asked to record a greeting to him or to send something, because he also was a member of the Greatest Generation. And I was just reading the obituaries this past week and I must tell you, I got kind of emotional. I was so proud to have known him, and we’re so lucky to have somebody like that as a model.

“Bill Walton was on this morning and I remember when Bill came to UCLA, he was really a hippie. And he was a social activist. And Coach Wooden said, ‘You gotta get your hair cut, Bill, or you’re off the team.’ And they had some real differences. And Bill told me a few years ago, he said, ‘You know, I just didn’t believe in all that stuff when I arrived there. But when I started raising my own children, I found that I was printing out Coach Wooden’s sayings and putting them in their lunch boxes so that they would have the same exposure to wisdom that I did.’

“So he really was right at the top of the ranks. He was somebody who, you know, did what he did so well. He had such enormous integrity; he was a modest man. I think in modern college coaching, Mike Krzyzewski is a direct descendent of him. I really think the world of him as well, and I’ve gotten to know him. Across the board there are any number of people who are doing great work that don’t do it for recognition or attention.

“Dialing back through history, nobody changed the lives of Americans more than Martin Luther King did. And he did it at the risk and ultimately at the cost of his life. But he did it also in a non-violent fashion, and he trusted the rule of law in America. That’s how we changed. So he was always somebody who when I covered him in the South that I thought of in larger-than-life proportions.

“But most of the people that I remember best and I will carry with me to my grave really are those whose names I don’t even know. They were young aid workers in Afghanistan, for example, or warriors in Iraq who saved each other, or I just saw a Navy SEAL out in East St. Louis who has come back from three tours and he has something called The Mission Continues. He is working with severely wounded veterans at the VA hospital in St. Louis to get them to train for public service because he feels so strongly that they want to continue to serve.

“I run into those kinds of people every day. And they don’t necessarily have a marquee name, nor are they looking to land on the cover of *People* magazine. They are just doing the right thing. And that’s what always gives me encouragement.”

BV: Anybody today who you haven’t had a chance to interview that you would like to?

TB: “Yeah, that’s an easy one. Osama Bin Laden. I’d like to know what the hell he was thinking.”