

At NBC, a Tale of Two Kingdoms

by Jim Cox

In pursuing some research not long ago into the history of the National Broadcasting Company, a couple of childhood admonitions I have carried with me most of my life kept resurfacing in my mind. As I dug deeper into the investigation, I realized that the two were working in tandem to make an indelible impression on me once again.

One allows: “No good deed goes unpunished.”

The other maintains: “Your sins will find you out.”

It seemed to me, as I concentrated on a timeframe in the life of the network, focusing on the middle of the 20th century and beyond, two of the key players in that mix could pass for Exhibit A in representing one or the other of those idioms that are so familiar to so many. That isn't to suggest that one was performing all right and the other was performing all wrong. But the proclivity was exhibited for leaning in one direction or the other.

Do opposites attract? My case study into the lives of these principals hinted that both were attracted to the same organization during the same epoch. While each one left a huge imprint on it, my suspicion is that there was room for

improvement all the way around. At the same time, it seems to me that one of them used his talents wisely while the other might have been wiser.

I absolutely defer to the very real possibility that some readers may assign different values to those situations I cite. This is a case study about two individuals in executive leadership who, time has borne out, made an impact on an undertaking that consumed them. I'll share their stories and admit upfront that it's fine to disagree with me. It's one reporter's observations, and yours may be totally opposite.

A little background is in order to bring everybody up to speed.

The National Broadcasting Company was formed in 1926, largely at the hands of visionaries within its parent enterprise, the Radio Corporation of America. RCA itself had existed only seven years then, founded in 1919 by the General Electric Company. Without belaboring the intriguing histories of those businesses' backgrounds, just as cream rises, there was a young man in place at that explicit juncture equipped with sufficient skill, intellect and ambition to grab the ball and do extraordinary things with it.

Progressively assuming greater responsibility in crafting America's first transcontinental broadcast web, David Sarnoff was just 38 on assuming the presidency of NBC in 1930. He would become so identified with the RCA ancillary that his name and NBC's were inexorably synonymous in the industry. While he ascended the corporate ladder to chairman of the RCA board in 1947, NBC—one of the smaller functions of that manufacturing and technological giant—was never far from his mind or his reach. He kept a hand in its decisions until retiring in 1970, a year before his death.

David Sarnoff isn't the subject of this study, however. He's introduced because he continued to be an overriding factor in the paramount decisions that were made at NBC. While he eventually deferred to others to run the network's day-to-day operations, it was Sarnoff that CBS magnate William S. Paley enjoyed sparring with on a regular basis as he attempted to stay at least one move ahead of NBC. It was a personal as well as professional quest with both men as they repeatedly pursued a course of one-upmanship, trying to press ahead of the other, while sometimes gleefully embarrassing their opposite number in the process.

The key players of this inquiry are Sylvester L. (Pat) Weaver and Robert Sarnoff, the latter a son of David Sarnoff. Both arrived at NBC in the late 1940s and traveled rapidly through the ranks of executive leadership before attaining the ultimate prize. What they did with their time there is the topic of this discussion.

Sylvester Laflin (Pat) Weaver, Jr. was the closest thing NBC witnessed to a true creative genius, undoubtedly so prior to the arrival of some inspired TV pacesetters in the final decades of the 20th century. Born at Los Angeles on December 21, 1908, Weaver was responsible for programming moves in two mediums that often have been cited for novel brilliance. Reporting his death at 93, *The New York Times* dubbed him "the most important innovator in television programming."

After getting into radio as an announcer following graduation magna cum laude from Dartmouth in 1930, he shifted between stations until landing a stint managing a San Francisco outlet. Weaver joined the Young & Rubicam

advertising agency in 1935, subsequently managed advertising at the American Tobacco Company (Lucky Strike, Pall Mall, Herbert Tareyton, et al.), and served in the U. S. Navy 1942-1945. Following the war, he returned to Young & Rubicam as vice president for radio and television. In 1949, Weaver made the transition that was to establish him as an icon in American entertainment programming.

Joining NBC that year as vice president in charge of television, his creative instincts coupled with demonstrated ability thrust him into the president's office in December 1953. In the interim, the boy wonder busied himself launching several features that were to make indelible impressions on broadcasting. On his first day on the job in 1949, he rescinded a cancellation order for *Meet the Press*, airing on radio then and currently TV's longest-running news forum. Joining the web at a time when TV sets were an uncommon opulence in American domiciles—with the trade run like radio as sponsors produced and controlled their own shows—Weaver argued successfully that national chains should produce the shows and sell commercial time to advertisers. (On that, he was in total accord with CBS mogul Paley.)

Weaver commissioned NBC spectaculars, 60-, 90- and 120- minute live specials like *Peter Pan* starring Mary Martin and Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, the first opera custom-built for video. His wife, actress Elizabeth Inglis, termed him "a great idealist" viewing TV as a way to introduce the common man to culture. "He put on opera for the first time because he said the man in the street ... wants to hear anything and he doesn't have the money," she allowed. "His plan was that everybody should have access."

Weaver was credited with debuting a plethora of innovative projects for NBC-TV. Among his brainchildren were *Today*, *Tonight*, *Home*, *Wide Wide World* and more. Two of his series, of course, persevere more than a half-century after their inception, offering no sign of fading while still mesmerizing audiences in large quantities every weekday.

For radio, he created the epic *Monitor*, an ambitious unstructured magazine classic that aired 40 hours every weekend at its start. It persisted for two decades (1955-1975) in abbreviated segments while some prophets claimed it “saved a network from extinction.” Whether it did or not is for conjecture, but it staved off the inevitable while attracting legions of fans and advertisers to NBC. Listeners were drawn by its immediacy, novelty and portability. Presenting snippets of mostly three minutes’ duration tops, its concept fit well into the growing impatience fans harbored for formulaic material while fitting precisely into the trendy lifestyles of Americans on the go. *Monitor’s* durability was a testament to Weaver’s ingenuity in establishing a method to inform, amuse and sustain with great diversity.

To keep things in their proper perspective, it should be noted that not every Weaver notion turned out as charmingly. The most colossal failure occurred on NBC Radio in 1955-1956. When Weaver and his protégés cleared NBC’s daytime schedule of nearly every longrunning soap opera, quiz, music and variety feature—disrupting the housewives’ loyalties to a pattern NBC had followed for decades—it found little favorable reception to a copycat version of *Monitor* bearing the soubriquet *Weekday*. A five- to six-hour daily magazine debuting on November 7, 1955, stemming from the phenomenal success of

Monitor, simply fell on deaf ears and was off the air in a matter of months. Then, with years of traditions now irretrievably broken, NBC found itself languishing in the cellar of discontent Monday through Friday during the sunlight hours. With its *Weekday* series a washout, millions permanently threw in the towel, having discovered other interests in the interim. The miscalculation was costly: it was turf NBC would never again dominate. Within weeks after *Weekday*'s departure, Weaver followed suit.

According to newspaper accounts, "His greatest power over network programming came when Mr. Weaver was NBC's president, a job he was forced to relinquish in 1955 to Robert Sarnoff, the son of Gen. David Sarnoff, the head of RCA." Wrote another: "Mr. Weaver was pushed out as NBC president in 1955 by Robert Sarnoff, son of David Sarnoff—the head of NBC's parent corporation, RCA." Although Weaver was named NBC chairman on relinquishing the presidency and CEO post, he labored between two Sarnoffs—papa, chairman of parent RCA, and son, president and CEO of NBC. While Weaver continued to receive plaudits for his dazzling achievements (e.g. in April 1956, the Newspaper Guild Press Club cited him "for creating new programming ideas and methods for bringing new excitement into television," one of numerous honors), there were published rumors that he was not a happy camper.

At a board meeting about eight months after being kicked upstairs, on September 7, 1956, derision erupted when Weaver announced he couldn't abide by some aspects of projected management reorganization. To everyone's utter surprise, even though rumors had circulated for months, he suddenly resigned in protest. Within days more loyalists (one with 30 years' tenure at NBC) quit.

Much of this exhibition, which NBC and RCA preferred to keep a lid on, spilled out onto the pages of the nation's newspapers. In the 1960s, Weaver joined Subscription Television, Inc., a pay cable TV venture that ultimately failed. He was a media consultant thereafter and died at 93 at Santa Barbara, California on March 15, 2002.

Robert W. Sarnoff, meanwhile, was the eldest of a half-dozen sons of David Sarnoff, the RCA chairman. When the younger Sarnoff was elected president of NBC and subsequently its chairman, of course the water cooler conversations in Rockefeller Center were abuzz with the inevitable whispers of favoritism and nepotism. Some branded him the "crown prince" and there was talk by naysayers of a "Sarnoff dynasty." But if one of his dad's biographers is to be believed, he earned the right to hold his offices through solid understudy and hard work, not purely ambition and kinship.

Born July 2, 1918 in New York City, Robert Sarnoff was equipped with a Harvard degree and a year of Columbia law school. He focused on broadcasting with the Coordinator of Information (later Office of Strategic Services) followed by a stint as a Naval communications officer during WWII. Joining Cowles Publishing afterward, he worked a year at one of its newspapers, *The Des Moines Register and Tribune*, before shifting to its *Look* magazine in New York.

Obviously restless, disenchanted with print media as a profession and—perhaps influenced by his father's forthrightness—in 1947, he decided television stood on the threshold of being the nation's chief news, amusement and advertising source. He also believed he should be identified with it. The younger Sarnoff discussed his beliefs with a chum, Frank Mullen, executive vice president

of NBC. In January 1948, Mullen hired him as an account executive (time salesman) at NBC. Though Sarnoff the elder supposedly conveyed unease, he didn't interfere in their arrangement.

Some time later Sarnoff the younger transferred to TV network programming and production. His dad's deep passion of two decades had been to see video developed to overtake audio, and it was on the brink of doing so right then. Meanwhile, Robert Sarnoff's star rose quickly. Elevated to vice president over the NBC film unit in 1952, he was named executive vice president of the company the following year. By the end of 1955, he was NBC president. "The younger Sarnoff has inherited his father's zest for battle," said Jack Gould reporting Robert's ascension to the presidency. But Robert wasn't done by a long shot; by 1957, he was chairman where he held the same post his father held at parent RCA.

Elected president of RCA in 1965, Robert Sarnoff was named CEO two years afterward. When his ailing father retired from the chairmanship, in the wings was a Gentleman-in-Waiting who had been groomed for the post for more than two decades. As he stepped into that role in 1970, he may have anticipated a durable tenure befitting a Sarnoff. But he soon learned that life does not favor every man equally. In fact, by Sarnoff standards, Robert's occupancy was fairly brief.

It coincided with some nasty economic reverses that soured any legacy he might have been credited with. Some of the disarray was laid directly at his feet. An ill-timed, ill-prepared folly into computers and abandonment of the pursuit in 1971 cost the company almost a half-billion dollars. Investors and directors took

Robert Sarnoff to the woodshed for it. Hard times led the firm to curtail its quests into space activities to converge its energies on electronics. Meanwhile, Sarnoff carried the company into widespread diversification, allowing it to invest heavily in domains far from its core business such as publishing (Random House), vehicle renting (Hertz), chicken farming (Banquet Foods), carpet-making (Coronet) and greeting cards (Gibson). To some, it seemed reckless and irresponsible and he was criticized for it.

In that same timeframe, hoping to find some relief for the bottom line, Sarnoff shopped NBC Radio and its owned-and-operated radio stations, but was unsuccessful in securing a buyer for the package. Signaling trouble to the public, meanwhile, NBC canceled its two-decades-old *Monitor* in January 1975, and in rapid succession, offered continuous news feeds starting in June 1975 (News and Information Service) for 55 minutes 24-7 to any station that subscribed, including non-affiliates. Few did, however, and that dismal failure was to be rescinded in less than two years. All of it portended bad tidings and must have appeared to industry watchers as cries of desperation.

In an attempt to turn the situation around and put a positive spin on their intents, nevertheless, the RCA directors abruptly fired David Sarnoff in late 1975. Perhaps a blessing was that his father didn't live to see it, nor most of the debacle that befell the mighty corporation he gave his life to; he died in 1971. After 49 years, a Sarnoff was no longer involved in steering NBC or its parent organization. The year 1975 marked the passing of a torch. Robert Sarnoff lived to be 78 and died in New York February 22, 1997 after battling cancer 16 years.

Both left their ultimate posts, in this reporter's observation, sorrowing. Both left under a cloud. One, on the surface, made a personal choice to depart; the other had none. But it seemed to me, neither did either one.

One, it also appeared, was punished for his good deeds while the other's poor choices brought him little good. Borrowing from yet another axiom, was it perhaps "the best of times and the worst of times"?

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August 6, 2008
SPERDVAC Radiogram