"A man lands on the moon. A president dies. If you can have one man in the world tell it to you, who do you turn on?" Fred Friendly, the president of CBS News, asked a reporter for Newsweek magazine in 1964. Friendly then answered his own question: "Cronkite."

Anchor of the CBS Evening News from 1962 until his retirement in 1981, Walter Cronkite was often deemed "the most trustworthy man in America."

And so, Douglas Brinkley reminds us, when Cronkite declared on air that the United States was "mired in a stalemate" in Vietnam and that the only "rational way out" was to negotiate, President Lyndon Johnson told his advisers, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost the country."

In this monumental, informative and lively biography, Brinkley, a professor of history at Rice University and contributing editor to Vanity Fair, follows Cronkite from his birth in Missouri to his salad days at CBS to a cantankerous retirement.

Although Brinkley doesn't hide his subject's feet of clay (he liked alcohol, lap dancers and lots of air time - and he loathed Dan Rather), he crowns Cronkite as an exemplar of television journalism at its best. Because Cronkite understood the medium, worked hard and exuded sincerity, he didn't always have to give his viewers the news they wanted, Brinkley writes, and "ended up mattering in the annals of history."

A responsible, reliable and judicious historian, Brinkley occasionally succumbs to the celebrity hype he so cogently critiques in his book.

Cronkite was not "the Muhammad Ali of American journalism" or a "full-fledged celebrity dragon slayer." He didn't "help define the youth zeitgeist."

Nor was he so much a "peace broker between Israel and Egypt," prodding President Anwar Sadat and Prime Minister Menachim Begin to agree to meet face-to-face with no preconditions, as a vessel through which the two leaders could begin the process of negotiations.

And yet, Brinkley also notes that most Americans do not distinguish between fame and accomplishment. He laments that Cronkite, whose make-up grew thicker and thicker as he aged, "never grappled with the possibility that he - the biggest TV news star in U.S. history - was part of the cultural problem" of news as entertainment.

And Brinkley allows us to wonder whether Esquire's decision to put Cronkite on its cover as one of the "Great American Things" (along with Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Robinson and Lassie) was, indeed, a tribute to his "truth-telling about Vietnam."

These days, television network news is sensational, soft and celebrified. It is delivered by pretty faces, male and female, in sound bites (in the '60s, a public figure could speak without interruption for a minute: now the average is nine seconds). Increasingly, younger Americans get their news from the Internet, cable TV and "The Daily Show," where it is pared down, partisan and polemical.

Compared to his successors, Cronkite, who, Brinkley notes, served as managing editor as well as anchor of...
the CBS Evening News, may well deserve our attention and admiration. And that's the way it is.

CRONKITE

By Douglas Brinkley
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Associated Images:

Walter Cronkite is shown at CBS offices in Washington, D.C, in 1952. Associated Press file