Title: The Bullitt Lecture in American History presents Daniel Schorr

Speaker 1:

This is the Seattle Public Library podcast of the 2008 A. Scott Bullitt Lecture in American History, featuring veteran journalist, Daniel Schorr, in conversation with Eric Liu. This event was held March 17th at Seattle's Town Hall.

Deborah Jacobs:

Good evening. I'm Deborah Jacobs, the city librarian, and I'm embarrassed that I have to talk at all, because now I'm teary-eyed and feel the same way you all do. I want to thank you for joining us at the Seattle Public Library's 2008 A. Scott Bullitt Lecture in American History. The library's annual American history lecture is made possible by an incredibly generous gift from the late Priscilla Bullitt Collins, in memory of her father, A. Scott Bullitt. I'm not sure if we're joined tonight by her brother, Stim Bullitt, but if so, I want to thank him, as well as his whole family. I also want to thank the Seattle Post-Intelligencer for their continual generous promotions of all of our library programs. And as always, I want to thank our friends, the Elliott Bay Book Company, for being with us. We like Elliott Bay in Seattle.

And finally, a special thank you to the Seattle Public Library Foundation, whose support makes every single one of our library programs possible, from early story time to evenings like this, story time for early learners. The Library Foundation represents thousands of people in our community who make gifts, both large and small, to buy books and materials for our collections, to present free public programs, to provide programs for Seattle's many immigrants and refugees, to support early learning so our children can enter school ready to read and ready to learn, and many other initiatives that we have at the library. So to the library donors, who are here with us this evening, on behalf of the people of Seattle and the Seattle Public Library, thank you.

The Seattle Channel is here tonight to film tonight's program for broadcast or for viewing on your computer. And this program is also being recorded for the library's podcast, and we hope you will subscribe to our podcast and our website, spl.org. Tonight, we're honored to host veteran journalist, Daniel Schorr. Mr. Schorr has worked at National Public Radio for the past 20 years. As NPR senior news analyst, he interprets national and international events. His new book, Come to Think of It: Notes on the Turn of the Millennium, collects some of his commentaries. He's also the author of a memoir,

Staying Tuned: A Life in Journalism. Daniel Schorr's distinguished career of more than six decades has earned him many awards for journalistic excellence, including three Emmy Awards and the Peabody Award. He wrote for the Christian Science Monitor and the New York Times. He was also a reporter for CBS, and he helped Ted Turner create CNN in 1979. Daniel Schorr worked with Edward R. Murrow, and is the last of Murrow's team to be still fully active in journalism.

I don't know about you, but I suspect many of you have the same habit, but when I hear Daniel Schorr's voice, I never turn off the radio. When I heard from Chris Higashi that he was coming for our lecture, I truly squealed, just like when I was 11 and The Beatles were on the Ed Sullivan TV show. Rather than deliver a lecture tonight, Mr. Schorr is joined on stage for a conversation with our own Eric Liu, local author, news commentator and television host. Eric Liu has been a member of the Seattle Public Library Board of Trustees since 2002, and he is now our library board president, guiding our policies and services for the city of Seattle. He's the author of Guiding Lights: How to Mentor and Find Life's Purpose, and The Accidental Tourist... The Accidental Tourist.

Eric Liu:

I'll take the sales of that one over...

Deborah Jacobs:

And the movie rights. The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker, and the very timely and important new book, The True Patriot, written with Nick Hanauer. And I'll just mention as a plug that Eric will be back here at Town Hall this coming Thursday evening at 7:30 for an open discussion on the book. Eric has been a frequent commentator on CNN, MSNBC and CNBC, and served as a speech writer and deputy domestic policy advisor for President Bill Clinton.

I think the next page tells me that I can turn it over to you, but I do want you to know that if you have a question, please write it down on the cards that we were providing as you walked in, and the ushers will pick them up and deliver them to the stage, and Eric will then moderate that last 15 minutes of our program. Following the program, everyone is invited to meet Daniel Schorr and have their book signed at the table. So please join me once again in honoring and welcoming Daniel Schorr for being with us tonight.

Eric Liu:

Some of you may know that Daniel Schorr started work early this morning. He flew to Seattle last night. He was on KUOW Weekday with Steve Scher this morning, gave a long luncheon talk at the Seattle Public Library Foundation luncheon, and is here with us tonight, and at 91, soon, I think, to be 92, is indeed the hardest working man in show business. We're very honored to have you here, Daniel.

Daniel Schorr:

Very much my pleasure.

Eric Liu:

I want to start with just where Deborah Jacobs mentioned, that moment that when people hear your voice and hear one of your commentaries beginning, it's one of those, as NPR calls it, driveway moments. You just stop in the driveway and you stay and you stay until the commentary is over. And one of the things that has always been on my mind as I listen to your voice is the simple question, how do you do it? How do you craft each of these commentaries?

Daniel Schorr:

I ask the same question.

Eric Liu:

Walk us through, from the moment an idea pops in your head to the time when it's actually being broadcast, the way that you go about creating one of these commentaries.

Daniel Schorr:

Yes. I must say, I have had to myself learn the fact that, for example, I'm in a restaurant, people sitting at the next table get up and say, "I'd know that voice anywhere," and that's happened to me over many, many years, that people find something different in my voice. I didn't cultivate it. I don't know where it came from. It may be what's left of the Bronx in me, where I grew up, that's it. But apparently, it's an asset, so I'll keep it.

Eric Liu:

It's worked this far. The idea of inspiration, when you hear something in the news or you read an article on the paper and you decide, well, this ought to be something I should do a commentary on, do you go about actually then taking notes on that article? How does it unfold, that you take something out of the stream of the news-

Daniel Schorr:

It's a whole process. For example, it can be having breakfast, while we're having breakfast, we have on NPR's morning edition in the background, listen to it, look at a couple of television programs, pick up the newspapers, about five of which we get at home, another three or four at the office. And somewhere, on the days when I'm supposed to do a commentary, somewhere in the course of all that listening and looking and so on, it comes up with, "You know what? This is the first time that comes on..." Or, "This reminds me of when..." Five more minutes of consultation, and usually by 9:00 in the morning, I have an idea outlined as to what I'm... I call in and say, "I'll tell you what I'm working on today."

I have a wonderful research assistant, so I say to her, "Get me a piece of paper, what happened and so on and so forth 12 years ago. You remember that? What else do you have on this in this situation?" And I get exactly targeted information is laid out on my desk. I cannot say too much about the importance of assistance and research in doing these things. And then, the process takes over. By noon, I've typed out a draft script. By 2:00, I'm in the office and editing the script by reading it to the editor, sometimes calls for changes. And by 4:00, we have recorded that day's commentary. Does that give you an idea?

Eric Liu:

It does. It still doesn't explain how the magic happens, but the magic is your magic, and one of the-

Daniel Schorr:

Oh, you want to know about my brilliance? I don't think it is brilliance. I'll tell you what it basically is, experience. There are not a great many things to say about being 91 as being a wonderful thing. Well, one of the things you can say, that I've been present for a great many things that people today only read about in history books. And even at NPR, where the average person is about one-third my age, even there, people stop me in the hall to ask a question. It happened once, passed by my office, this young producer [inaudible 00:10:56] "Dan, did you cover the Spanish American war?" And I said, "No, but why do you ask?"

And then, you realize that this great asset I have is simply that I've been there, I was there when it went on. I saw Nikita Khrushchev storming around the country, I interviewed him. I had a long history with Richard Nixon, and if we have time, I'll tell you a little bit about that. It is not brilliance, it's not exactly talent, it is experience, and I'm not talking about Hillary Clinton or anything, experience, and then applying that to today's events.

Eric Liu:

Well, it seems to me that that brilliance lies in those four words you said a moment ago when you were talking about your research assistant, this reminds me when, because your ability not only to have been around and lived through all that experience, but to be able to draw on it and connect dots, and take something like an Obama phenomenon and connect it to a JFK phenomenon, or take somebody, like Hillary Clinton when she first arrived on the scene and the commentaries that you wrote about her, about Eleanor Roosevelt and the parallels that one might draw there, it's that ability to make the connections there. And I'm wondering, for you, you've now been doing the radio thing for over two decades, is the voice that you have found now in radio something substantially different from the inner voice that you had cultivated for all those years in television?

Daniel Schorr:

One thing has changed. I did stories, stories in Russia, I did stories in Germany, I did stories from Holland, I did stories from Washington, and I pursued them, I tried to find the people who knew more about them and were participants in them. When I was in television, I had to learn to put on makeup and stand in front of a camera out somewhere on a street corner because they wanted to make it look real and all of that. And with all that, it was rather strenuous.

As I approached this age of 90, 91, I said, "What is it that I can still do that doesn't require me to run around a great deal?" The answer is commentary, analysis. Somebody else is responsible for giving you the facts. You can get them from newspapers, they still exist, you can get them from radio and television, more or less mixed up with people calling other people names, but nevermind. And while people are deluged with information, I frequently find they don't know how to put it together, what it means. And so, my professional life is now dedicated to what I can call in one word meaning, what does it mean? And if I can contribute to understanding what otherwise seems to be incomprehensible, then I think I've done my job.

Eric Liu:

One of the things you write about in both this most recent book, this collection of your NPR commentaries, as well as in Staying Tuned, your memoir, you talk about your very first experience as a professional journalist when you were-

Daniel Schorr:

Yes. You want to hear that?

Eric Liu:

12, right?

Daniel Schorr:

12 years old, living in the Bronx in a ground floor flat with my widowed mother and my younger brother. And one hot July day, the windows were open, because we didn't have air conditioning, I heard a big plop outside the window. So I went and I looked, and there was a man lying dead. I had never seen a dead person before, and so I should have been overwhelmed emotionally, but I wasn't. I looked at it, I called the police, waited for the police to come [inaudible 00:15:27] tried to find out what they could find out.

And when this was over, I made a telephone call to our local newspaper, The Bronx Home News, which had advertised that they would pay $5 for any original news strip that was phoned into them. I phoned The Bronx Home News, told them about the man who apparently had committed suicide and made $5. At the age of 12, my first payment for journalism was $5. But it was not only the $5. Later on, as I looked back on it, I said, "How come I didn't get upset? How come I didn't get emotionally involved in seeing a dead man out there?" The answer is I must have some way of standing on the sidelines and

describing without myself becoming emotionally involved. And then, I thought, if I can do that, maybe I ought to be a journalist. And so, $5 and a suicide man launched my career.

Eric Liu:

I ask about that story precisely because of that lesson you had drawn about detachment and how it perhaps suited you well for certainly reporting in journalism. I'm wondering now, in this phase of your career in which you are doing commentary and making meaning, as you say, I'm wondering if you give yourself more permission from time-to-time to engage emotionally more with the news?

Daniel Schorr:

That's a sensitive question. The answer is yes, I do, a little. I try not to overdo it. I still feel that somebody will get mad at me for doing this. But every once in a while, it's so big, so overwhelming, that I can admit, and my NPR bosses, thank god, don't mind it, that I can permit my own feeling about it to show through, but now and then and not too much.

Eric Liu:

What would be an example of that now and then and not too much?

Daniel Schorr:

One example would be writing about the war in Iraq. When I think in some of my commentaries, I allowed it to come through, that I thought it was a terrible thing that President Bush had allowed three neoconservatives in the White House to talk him into invading Iraq for no reason. And when they said they were sending people to look for the weapons of mass destruction, but they hadn't found them yet, but don't give up, we'll still find some, I sometimes expected that if we didn't find them, we would put some there, that may happen. But that remains to me a source of enormous outrage, $3 trillion and a lot of American lives later, I still get aroused when I think about Iraq.

Eric Liu:

One of the things that you have written about and reflected aloud about also in those early years when you first began to discover your temperamental fitness for journalism was you've described in childhood just this deep overpowering insecurity.

Daniel Schorr:

That's true.

Eric Liu:

And the way in which it fueled you, in many ways, and sharpened your sense of ambition. Can you tell us a little bit more about that, at least your memory of that insecurity, and how, over the course of this long distinguished career, whether it has waned, or whether, in some way, there's still a kernel of it driving you?

Daniel Schorr:

Well, I grew up in the Bronx, poor, fat and without a great many ways of expressing myself. And so, I decided to not get too deeply involved with myself and try to externalize everything. I don't know, and I'm not sure that I want to go into too much that's old and personal here, but this is a crowd which is something like my family and I will say so. My father died when I was five years old, and I suspect, without knowing, I suspect that a large part of me growing up was protecting myself because I didn't have a father. Now, I've never said that to an audience before, but you're a bunch of nice people, so there.

Eric Liu:

We promise not to use that information against you. One of the things that is so striking about the course of your career is that you have been engaged and a player on the stage in so many ways that many relationships, you mentioned Richard Nixon, have their own incredible, sometimes ironic arc to them.

Daniel Schorr:

I'm sorry, I missed the word.

Eric Liu:

An incredible ironic arc to the relationship with some figures, whether heads of state or leading political figures in the United States and around the world, and I'm thinking about your relationship with Nixon in particular.

Daniel Schorr:

There you go again. All right, Nixon, how many weeks do we have?

Eric Liu:

Tell us, actually, begin at the end, begin at the end.

Daniel Schorr:

I'll do it in my own way and I'll try to condense it a little bit. I was in CBS covering Washington and the White House, and one day, Nixon flew to New York and delivered a speech to the lay Catholic

organization, the Knights of Columbus. The Supreme Court had just come out with this ruling that the federal government was not allowed to give financial assistance to parochial schools because of the First Amendment. Nixon made a speech in which he promised, in spite of what the Supreme Court had said, that he would make sure that they would support parochial schools. Nobody I knew knew how he could do that, and I was assigned to find out what is it that the Nixon administration planned to do for Catholic schools.

And so, I made a few phone calls, and the answer [inaudible 00:22:16] came, don't know what he can do, that the Supreme Court edict was pretty sweeping, don't know what he can do and I don't know what he's talking about. Until finally, I got to speak to the lobbyist for the Catholic school movement, and asked him if he knew what Nixon was going to do for the Catholic schools. The man said, "If it were not for my turned color, Mr. Schorr, I would tell you that what Nixon says is bullshit." So I got on the air on CBS, and I didn't quite use that word, but I got on the air in CVS on the evening news of Walter Cronkite and I said, "Try as I can, I cannot find anyone who has any idea what the President can do about these parochial schools. It looks to many of them, although this is for political reasons only, it has no great substance to it."

I later found out that a couple of people at the White House saw that broadcast and told Nixon about it, and he got very angry with me. And so [inaudible 00:23:30] call Edgar Hoover, tell him I want to get something on the son of a bitch, try to find out something, will you?" And so, Bob Haldeman called J. Edgar Hoover and said, "The boss wants some background on CBS correspondent, Daniel Schorr." They did not know what the word means exactly to the FBI. For them, background goes with the word background check. Background check is what you do in formality when somebody's being appointed to a White House position and they have to do a background check.

And so, having misunderstood, Hoover then started a lightning attempt to find out, from all over the country, who knew me, who could say things about me, my boss, my brother, various friends of mine. And eventually, an FBI agent showed up at my office and asked to interview me. And I said, "Well, yeah, sure. What's it about?"

"Well, sir, could I start," he said, "where did you go to school?"

And I said," What is this for?"

He said, "Well, sir, I'm only supposed to interview you. You must be aware that you're in line for an appointment of trust."

I said, "No, I'm not aware of any such thing at all."

So the FBI agent went back to headquarters and says, "Dan Schorr says he doesn't know of any White House appointment, and therefore he refuses to conduct the interview."

And that was telephoned to Haldeman. Holdman, "You what? You told him? Stop it right away." And it went on for 24 hours, and after 24 hours, it was abruptly halted and that was the end of that. Except

that, of course, it's an interesting story, so you can be sure that some newspaper person is going to get hold of it. And sure enough, a Washington Post reporter learned about it. Don't ask me from whom.

Eric Liu:

You would never reveal your sources.

Daniel Schorr:

And printed a front page story on White House investigates a CBS correspondent saying it's for a job. As I later found out, there then was a small crisis meeting at the White House. Chuck Colson said, "If this thing gets into the papers, we've got to figure out some damage control. What do we say?" And they went around around, and finally, someone said, "It may be the only thing you can say is that he was being considered for a job. It's not very plausible, but we don't have many options open." And so, Ron Ziegler, press secretary to the president, goes out into the briefing room and announces that President Nixon wants to know that, through an error, investigation of Dan Schorr for a job started before we had offered him the job, and that was a mistake, and the job for which he was being considered was at the Council on Environmental Quality.

Months later, now, Nixon is under impeachment investigation, and all these people have to testify about all the terrible things connected to Watergate, and they were also asked to testify, "What was the FBI investigation of Dan Schorr, what was that for?" And they had to admit on the stand that it was not to do anything nice about me, but to do something possibly very nasty about me. The House Judiciary Committee drew up the Bill of Impeachment, three articles. Article two said, "Abuse of presidential power," and under that, "unwarranted investigation by FBI of Daniel Schorr." So there I was, a moment in history. As you know, the impeachment didn't go through because Nixon finally resigned.

Well, so 20 years passed, Nixon has resigned, he's out of office for a long time, he's written books, he's more or less running for ex-president. And as it happens, I'm invited to a dinner where Nixon is going to speak. And he gave a report in his speech, he was a very good speaker, he gave a report on a recent trip to the Soviet Union and so on. And when the dinner was over, I could not resist going up there, and walked up as he was getting up, "Mr. Nixon, I don't know if you'll remember me, but..." And he stopped, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Sure, Dan Schorr, damn near hired you once." So that's the Nixon story.

Eric Liu:

That is one of those great counterfactual history moments. What if Dan Schorr had work for Richard Nixon? One of the things that's interesting about our politics today, and your commentaries highlight this time and again, is how thin many people's reservoir is, how shallow, of historical reference points. And so, people want reflexively to say Iraq is akin to Vietnam, but not necessarily know all the ways in which that analogy might be drawn, or Hillary is to Eleanor Roosevelt, or there's something about

Barack Obama that's like JFK. And I'm wondering, for you, given that you've lived through this history, do you find yourself always wanting to correct or sharpen up these analogies, or do you just-

Daniel Schorr:

Well, I find myself constantly being surprised by discussion saying, "And this is very much like what happened." And I'll say, "You remember what happened when Jack Kennedy did this or that?" And the person will shake his head, "No, I don't remember." You work on an assumption that there's a certain amount of knowledge that everybody has, except if you reach a certain age, there will be people who were born many, many years later, who didn't experience that, may have learned about it in school.

So I agree with your suggestion, that I'm appalled on how little sense of history Americans in general have. I think television is part of that. I think television simply holds you spellbound with reality or unreality of today, and it washes out the need to go and look at a book and find out what happened then. I've never seen a time in American life when people were so divorced from the history of their own country.

Eric Liu:

Do you think that this is something that has accelerated with young people today? When you speak to audiences like this, when you go to different cities, is there a sense, even among your colleagues at NPR, that this rising generation is almost to be written off, that it's too late for them to build up the stores of historical knowledge that you're talking about?

Daniel Schorr:

Well, obviously, it's not everyone. As a matter of fact, the NPR audience I find rather selective. When I meet people who listen to NPR, they are generally well-educated people. So the kind of people I'm talking about, who are off on skateboards or off committing gang crimes or god knows what all, that's a different segment of society. But increasingly, Americans live for today, live for the moment, live for maybe tomorrow if you get a raise to help pay for it. But there is something about a truncated sense of the continuity of life that somehow goes with the fact of constant distraction.

Brilliant people are busy inventing constantly newer and better ways of distracting Americans, be they video games, be they internet chats and [inaudible 00:32:23] but it is really a pity how profound is the lack of knowledge and feeling for the history of this country. It's hard sometimes to conduct a conversation, in which you might refer to, "Well, remember the letter of Martin Luther King from the county jail?" Or, "You remember Selma?" If I were to ask a dozen high school students today who've learned a little bit about civil rights in their schooling, I would ask them, "What does Selma mean in the history of civil rights in this country?" I don't think one in a hundred would know the answer to that question.

Eric Liu:

Do you think that the art of argument is also something that's getting lost? You're describing a knowledge of history. But when you make commentaries and when you compose these four-times-a-week essays that you do for NPR, even though oftentimes, as you say, your tone is dispassionate, you are making arguments, you are setting things up, you are exposing the weakness and an assumption. Where did you learn that, and how does that get passed on, other than simply consuming more media and listening to commentaries?

Daniel Schorr:

I don't know how. It just happened over a period of years. There wasn't a specific way to learn to do that. You are where you are, you are the sum of all your experiences and all your education you have, and it comes out that way.

Eric Liu:

You mentioned earlier that Richard Nixon had called you an SOB, and one of the nice blurbs that you have in your book, Staying Tuned, comes from Walter Cronkite, who says that, "The pages of this book will reveal why heads of state and people throughout our times have called Daniel Schorr an SOB." And as I read that and as I began to read the history of your career, it struck me that for so many people today, particularly in my generation or younger, who come to Daniel Schorr first through your commentaries on NPR and through this identity that you've had now for these last couple of decades, the words that might come to mind are wise, avuncular, grandfatherly, this perspective.

Daniel Schorr:

Keep going.

Eric Liu:

Buttering you up there. But the word son of a bitch would not come to mind. And I'm wondering about that part of your identity and that time, when you were a reporter and when the nature of reporting was that competitive and your ambition was fired that way, and do you today, can you conjure up that part of you that Walter Cronkite would have admiringly called an SOB?

Daniel Schorr:

I often wonder why Walter used that expression. I hope that what he was doing, and he didn't express himself very well, was saying, "The guy who was considered in the Nixon White House to be an SOB." Otherwise, he was a friend, we were on very good terms, and I saw that little blurb with the SOB in it and wondered about it, and decided that it was taken from a larger context where you lost the fact that he was talking about Nixon in the White House, I hope.

Eric Liu:

I trust. One of the questions that comes naturally when you survey your decades in journalism is a very simple one, which is, is it the case that the more things change, the more they stay the same, or is it the case that things have changed so rapidly that it's hard to keep track of what's what and where's where? When you think about you have been not only present for, but you've been quite actively involved in the arrival of each new medium in the American journalistic history, from the arrival of television, the way that the internet has come along, the media, the radio, even CNN, you were president at the creation of CNN, did each of these new evolutions make you think, wow, everything's brand new now, or did it make you think, boy, this is just the same kind of stuff I was doing for The Bronx Home News?

Daniel Schorr:

It's an interesting question because it happened to me a couple of times in my career. I grew up wanting to be a newspaper man. My greatest ambition was to be a foreign correspondent of The New York Times, which I almost made it. But before I could get the newspaper job, I was offered a job at CBS. What had happened was that I was living in Holland and a great flood came to Holland and resulted in a lot of quite dramatic stories, including my flying with Army helicopters as they picked people off trees and so on. And I'd been doing some work for CBS, and they asked me would I give a vivid description of what was going on, and I did. And I gathered somebody said that Murrow liked it, with the result that one day, a few months later, I received a cable from Murrow, written as only... It sounded a little bit Churchillian, even in the cable that it was, "Would you at all consider joining the staff of CBS News with an initial assignment in Washington?"

And I had to weigh, did I want to change careers? I didn't know anything about radio or television very much. But the offer was attractive and I took it and I went home to New York to join CBS. This was 1953, and television was in its infancy still, more or less in its infancy still, and I didn't know much about it. And watched Douglas Edwards, who was doing the news for CBS, and tried to learn what it was he was doing, because I might have to do it, and realized that there's a whole new profession you need, which is not just being a journalist, but being a television journalist. Then you have to know a lot of different things. You have to learn to use a teleprompter, you have to know what kind of makeup to put on in case you ever have to put on makeup and so on.

Indeed, I asked a young producer at CBS, I said, "What is the secret to success for a newspaper man going into television? I can write a story [inaudible 00:39:27] but to present it, what are the things I need to know?" And the young fellow said, "That's easy, easy, easy. The answer is sincerity. If you can fake that, you've got it made."

Eric Liu:

Would the same advice be given for somebody asking, "How do you make the transition then from television to radio?"

Daniel Schorr:

That's a transition which I haven't made. I am computer-illiterate myself. Yes, I must say, I've done it almost all, up until the internet came along, up until bloggers came along, up until computers came along, where people can select the information precisely that they want and get it all and communicate with each other by email. That is a world I never made, and I have to admit that at 91, I'm going to let others do that for me.

Eric Liu:

One of the stories that you tell in your memoir is about how, at a certain point fairly far along in your career, Frank Zappa, the rock musician, contacted you with an idea that he wanted to pitch about doing a show together. And you asked, "Why on earth me? The kids who are listening to you have no idea." Tell us what he said in response to, "Why me?"

Daniel Schorr:

Yes. Thank you for reading my book, firstly. Yes, this is very odd thing. I had never heard of Frank Zappa. I'm not very big on rock music altogether, I'll make that confession to you. And one day, I was sitting in the living room reading, the phone rings, and I said, "Who? Spell it." And then, I repeated after, "Z-A..." My young daughter, who was in the room reading also, heard that, looked up and said, "Daddy, Frank Zappa." I said, "Lisa, who's Frank Zappa?" Nevermind. Anyway, they told me, a very popular musician all over the country. He was coming to Washington, he wanted to have lunch with me because he had an offer to make to me. Frank Zappa has an offer for me.

We had lunch. He said, "Now, I'll tell you what this. I know, among the kids who follow me, that they're turned off and they don't vote. And now, we have all these people taking over our government and ruining it. I want to do something to get kids to get out and register and vote and try to retake the government for the American people." I said, "That's nice. So where do I come in?"

"Well, I'm giving concerts in Washington and Baltimore. I would like you to come with me to one of the concerts. You can bring your daughter if you want. And during intermission, I want you to make an appeal to the public, the young kids there, to get out and vote. Will you do that?" I said, "Yes, I'll do that." and I did that. Then he had another idea, he said, "ABC would like to have a late night show with me and my band, and they've asked me how to construct what kind of a format I would have for that." And Zappa said, "What I'd like to do is once a week, you come on from Washington, we'll be in Los Angeles, and the members of my band will have a colloquy with you and they'll ask you about this and that, and so you explain it to them."

So I said, "Why me?" He said, "Because these young kids don't trust anybody their age. They trust you, because you're an older man who's been around for a long time, and so they think you will tell them the truth, which not many people do." Wow. So I said, "Sure." ABC didn't take the idea, and so it never happened. But had it happened, can you imagine, The Zappa-Schorr Show?

Eric Liu:

You would have changed rock and roll history, that's for sure. We're going to give a five-minute warning here. If you've got questions that you'd like to write on those little cards that should have been at your seats, fill out those cards and pass them to the aisle. We'll have folks collecting your cards, and in five more minutes, we'll be calling some of your questions and I will put them to Daniel Schorr.

While they're doing that, let me ask you another question. You've talked about this transition and the way in which you've moved from news and storytelling and reporting to offering commentary, and I'm wondering, if you look at CNN, for instance, where you spent the founding years, one of the things that's happening in cable news generally, whether it's Fox or CNN or MSNBC, is the way they try to bump up ratings is they deliberately cross that line between news and opinion. And somebody like Lou Dobbs realizes that the way to get that much more attention is to go-

Daniel Schorr:

Absolutely.

Eric Liu:

How do you feel about that?

Daniel Schorr:

How I feel about it? Don't tell him I said so because we used to work together, so just between us, among us, I think that Lou Dobbs is a scandal. There is something about America today, they like to be stirred up, they like to have people shouting at people, and you get a show on NBC where you can't hear anything because they're so busy yelling at each other and so on. I know that cable television likes that kind of stuff, and apparently it does appeal to people and whatever it is. But this is my profession, journalism, and these people claim to be involved in that profession, so that gives me the right to say what you're doing is a debasement of any journalistic ethic.

Eric Liu:

We've got questions coming in like crazy, so let me start with a question from an audience member here. What presidents and/or congressional leaders have most impressed you in your years of covering the news, and which have least impressed you?

Daniel Schorr:

Well, there are some. Any question like that, the answer starts with Franklin Roosevelt, and you go on from there. And then, there was Truman, and then, of course, Jack Kennedy. The people that I think were meritorious in their leadership, I don't think would differ much from what every one of you would probably agree to. We know who the bad ones were, Harding, people like that, Coolidge, not very important people. But for the rest, I think history tells us.

Eric Liu:

This is another question from a different audience member. Do you think the media has been fair and balanced in their coverage so far of the presidential campaign this season?

Daniel Schorr:

They've been fair. There is a problem with media coverage of the campaign, I'm not sure if fairness is a problem, the real problem seems to me that the media tend to trivialize the campaign and trivialize all politics by looking for the minor little things that will arouse people, the gotcha thing, they, oh, he said this a little differently than he said it last week, look how he's flip-flopping. Oh, they love the word flip-flopping. They operate on the outskirts of what's going on, merely looking for things which you can start an argument with. They do that to both of them, or to all of them. In that sense, I don't think it is a prejudice against one party or another. It is, however, a great prejudice against honest journalism.

Eric Liu:

Well, to follow up, it connects to your comment about the Lou Dobbs phenomenon and the way in which, in some sense, these media organizations that are either playing that gotcha game or the Lou Dobbs game can say that they are responding merely to public demand, that this is what draws viewers or ratings. How do we change that half of the equation, the demand side, and what folks in the consuming world actually say they want and want in media coverage?

Daniel Schorr:

I don't know. It is true, if it were not for the fact that audiences like these things, then they wouldn't do them. So if we want to get better media, we better get a better citizenry.

Eric Liu:

And then, this is another question from an audience member that follows up right on that, which is, and you alluded to it with your Zappa story, but what are the kinds of things that you would encourage folks in their 20s and 30s right now to do in order to become more engaged civically and to be more mindful citizens in the way you're [inaudible 00:49:56].

Daniel Schorr:

Well, the only thing I can say is this. If you're talking about young people who want to go into journalism, the answer is do learn about history and learn another specialty. Nowadays, the media require a certain amount of specialization. If you're a lawyer, we see people called legal correspondence, we see people called medical correspondence, science correspondence, economic correspondence. Information tends to be compartmentalized these days, and each one requires a certain expertise. Learn to write and learn to be an expert on something, and then go find yourself a job.

Eric Liu:

Here's a question, again, in a similar vein. Do you perceive any regular cycle of civic activism in our country's history, activism followed in turn by apathy? And if so, where do you think we sit right now in the turning of those cycles?

Daniel Schorr:

I don't know. I don't know. I'd like to be able to say we're going through cycles, and this is a bad cycle, and then will come a good cycle. I'm not sure it's true. It's, to me, an unanswerable question.

Eric Liu:

How do you keep from getting judgmental, or what keeps you hopeful, as you survey the news and create your commentaries?

Daniel Schorr:

Who said I'm hopeful?

Eric Liu:

That's quite an accusation to level at you.

Daniel Schorr:

Repeat the question.

Eric Liu:

Actually, I think you've answered the question, I'm going to take that. Here's one, which is your take on the conservative movement and its rise and ascendance over the course of recent decades. William F. Buckley, of course, passed away not too long ago. Is your take on the ascendance of conservatism, of movement conservatism, that the movement is about to wane, or that it's about to see great days and revival now?

Daniel Schorr:

The answer to that question is yes, I think so. I have written, I think I've brought this up, America goes through political realignments every 20, 30 years or so, and there was a realignment when Gingrich came in with a contract with America and the whole country moved a little bit towards the right. Those who had been independent went to the right, some of the Democrats had moved into an independent position, and it was a kind of a big movement.

I think that that realignment has now run out of steam, and now we're seeing a redressing of that by things are moving towards Democrats. The conservatives, like Goldwater, people like that, and Bill Buckley, were accepted and esteemed, but we also get a group who are called neocons, who go beyond conservatism to being something more radical. That, I think, the neocons have had it, the conservatives are in trouble, and the Republicans could mop up everything if they could for once agree to do the things in common. The Democrats are simply their own worst enemies, and you have to wonder what is going to happen. But the tenor of the question, I think, is right. I think we are, in general, in a massive, slow push back towards, I think, now, if I even dare to say the word, towards liberalism.

Eric Liu:

As somebody who's seen the rise and fall of labels like liberal, is that a word that you would want to have revived and said and spoken without euphemism or embarrassment, or do you also interchangeably, like many do, use the word progressive for-

Daniel Schorr:

We have it all worked out, there are no liberals anymore, they're all progressives.

Eric Liu:

Here's a question that... Do you feel, as someone proposed, that having an African American as president, should Barack Obama win, would change perceptions of the United States around the world, in the Middle East, Africa, so forth?

Daniel Schorr:

Oh, but absolutely, but absolutely. I was just reading an article in a German publication, they had taken a poll in Germany about which candidates in the American election did they like, and Obama come out way ahead of anybody else in Germany. These people read dispatches about what's going on, and they decided that they liked... And I think that they... Yeah.

Eric Liu:

That is precisely the kind of thing that actually his opponents have begun to use against Barack Obama, the fact that there have been questions raised by those in the conservative movement and elsewhere about his patriotism, and you certainly have lived through enough experiences where people's patriotism is being questioned. Do you think that notion of patriotism right now is so beyond repair and so beyond restoring in an honest way for people to have civic dialogue about, is so abused, that we need to talk about something else, or do you still think there is an essence there that people in media and the political realm can restore?

Daniel Schorr:

The word patriotism is simply used too much, and challenging patriotism is really beyond the pale to me. We are all patriots, even conservatives, but we are all patriots. And every time I read that this person was accused of being unpatriotic, because you read what's... Patriot becomes almost a synonym for some people as wrong. Instead of saying wrong, you're unpatriotic. I think we'll get over that, we'll get over that.

Eric Liu:

There are several questions that are just asking you in different ways to put the three remaining candidates in the presidential campaign, McCain, Obama, Clinton, in historical context. When you see these three, who do they remind you of or what do they remind you of in your career?

Daniel Schorr:

Obama reminds me a little bit of Jack Kennedy, who tried to lift politics above politics and speak in transcendental terms about a community of Americans who should have to come together. This attempt to forge a unified America, when I see Obama talking that way, does remind me a little bit of Jack Kennedy.

Eric Liu:

What about Hillary Clinton?

Daniel Schorr:

Hillary Clinton, what is the question again about her?

Eric Liu:

Who she reminds you of, or what historical antecedents come to mind when you look at the phenomenon of Hillary Clinton?

Daniel Schorr:

Nothing rather direct. I'm struggling with whether I should say Eleanor Roosevelt. I'm not at all sure. Only in a general idea that they were First Ladies in the White House, intelligent and with ideas of their own about how to help the country, and especially the disadvantaged people. But in style and their way of doing it, they're so different that I had... Let me say with limitations, she reminds me a little bit of Eleanor Roosevelt, not lot, but a little.

Eric Liu:

And what about John McCain and the Straight Talk Express and that phenomenon, what historical precedent or things...

Daniel Schorr:

John McCain, I don't know. I can't find one. I will not say that a person who's served in war reminds me of somebody else. Let's drop it out. I don't have a very interesting answer to that.

Eric Liu:

We have time for two more questions here, and I have one in mind for the final one. So I want to put this next to last question here, which is, why was it that you chose to make the move to NPR? What was it that led you to actually go to the world of radio?

Daniel Schorr:

Oh, that's easy. I have a record of having disagreements with bosses, and when I left CBS, it was because Bill Paley no longer approved of me because I made too much trouble for him. In the end, having been the very first editorial employee of CNN, and in my first contact with Ted Turner, after about five years, I just decided that there were things about Ted Turner that I couldn't take, including his wanting to use me to denounce over-the-air television and to try to help him with his marketing. He never could quite see the difference between the business side and the editorial side, and we had some differences, and so I left CNN at the end.

When I left CNN in 1985, I had done occasional commentaries for NPR, and Bob Siegel, who now hosts on All Things Considered, and was then the news director, said, "How would you like to increase the number of your commentaries and be more or less on-staff, or not exactly on-staff?" And I needed a job, and I took it, and it turned out to be wonderful. And it's getting on now from 1985 to being 23 years, and maybe it'll be the last time I have a falling out with my boss.

Eric Liu:

Well, last question here, which is forget about the secret of your brilliance for writing commentaries, what a lot of people have wanted to know is what is the simple secret of your regimen of diet and exercise that keeps you so lucid and aware and sharp at age 91?

Daniel Schorr:

Ooh. My wife does it. She punctures ideas which aren't very good ideas and so on and sets little boundaries, where occasionally I can go off on a tangent, and she hauls me back from the tangent.

Eric Liu:

Well, Daniel Schorr, we are certainly grateful for all the exploring of tangents you have done over your long and distinguished career, and on behalf of the city of Seattle and the community gathered here, we thank you for joining us this evening.

Daniel Schorr:

Thank you.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to this Seattle Public Library podcast.