
David Westin | ABC President

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On a recent Friday evening in December, ABC News President David Westin got a tip nobody could know about. At least not yet. Westin received word from the White House that President George W. Bush was inviting an ABC News correspondent to cover his secret trip to Iraq. Westin was brought in to discuss specific details and ensure that word of Bush's imminent departure did not go public until after he'd touched down in Iraq.

Just two days later, Westin was again working on a story involving a high-ranking elected official. Westin, a former partner at WilmerHale, sat in a Washington DC restaurant having lunch with ABC News Correspondent Jonathan Karl, while discussing the reporter's pending interview with Vice President Dick Cheney, which was slated to cover a range of issues critics have pointed to during the last eight years.

This was nothing new for Westin. Overseeing ABC News puts him in the role of both publisher and editor. That means he's not only in charge of hiring and firing, but also the content in a news story. "I believe there is very substantial overlap between what a good lawyer and a good journalist does," says Westin. "They have as their most important trait the requirement to ask the right questions. And to know who to ask questions

of. The journalists who I most worry about are those who don't know the questions to ask or have a sense of who is reliable or who is not."

For the Cheney interview, Westin and Karl wanted to make sure they tried to get the vice president to open up on several hot button issues.

"We knew going in that the main topics to cover were Iraq, weapons of mass destruction, Guantanamo and waterboarding," says Westin. "The challenge with something like that is to get the interview subject to go beyond the standard talking points. The question is, can we get something that will elicit a response we haven't heard before?"

By many accounts, the subsequent interview proved a success. Cheney spoke at length on the tactics used by the Bush Administration following 9/11 that were designed to pry information from terrorist suspects. "I think that anybody who'd looked at the situation the morning after the 9/11 attack would never have bet that we'd been able to go this long without another attack," said Cheney during the interview with Karl. Cheney also signaled for the first time that he approved of waterboarding.

As head of ABC News, Westin is responsible for all aspects of ABC News' broadcasts, including World News with Charles Gibson, Nightline, Good Morning America, 20/20 and This Week with George Stephanopoulos. In short, Westin's post-WilmerHale career is likely much different from that of other alums.

"You get to work with really smart, interesting, dedicated people," says Westin. "We come in to find out things that no one else knows. When we do it well, we have a chance to contribute something to society overall that will help people live their lives better. It's a form of public service that I take

very seriously.”

Westin has been president of ABC News for 11 years. Prior to that, he served as president of the ABC Television Network for three years after working as general counsel for Capital Cities (now ABC, Inc.), which bought ABC in 1986. Yet, in 1997, with no experience in the news business, Westin was put in charge of what was arguably broadcasting's top reporting division, with a cadre of stars that included the late Peter Jennings, Ted Koppel, Diane Sawyer and Barbara Walters.

Westin's time at the top began with a seminal event: the investigation and subsequent impeachment of President Bill Clinton. “About 10 months after starting the job I was in Cuba for the Pope's visit, when I got a call about a 19-year-old intern that our reporting said had dealings with the President,” says Westin. “I didn't think we had enough to go with the story. I went back to eating dinner and then got a call 45 minutes later saying the AG had expanded the scope of the investigation into obstruction of justice charges. The story was moving quickly.”

Later that night, ABC News Radio, on Westin's go-ahead, was one of the first news outlets to report on Monica Lewinsky. A few days later, ABC was the only news organization to report on her blue dress. For months, ABC News was alone in discussing the dress, and it was left to Westin to defend his journalists' reporting.

As the story turned into the impeachment of the president, “there was so much to consider, but I was most worried with how the legal process worked and providing an understanding of how the constitution worked for my reporters,” says Westin. “I remember discussing the rule of law with Peter Jennings and Ted Koppel on the set. It was back to Constitutional

Law One.”

Westin says his legal background—he served as a law clerk to Justice Lewis F. Powell of the Supreme Court of the United States and to Judge J. Edward Lumbard of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit before practicing at WilmerHale and teaching as an adjunct law professor at Harvard and Georgetown universities—was a vital component of learning, on the fly, how to navigate a newsroom.

During his tenure, Westin has had to cope with losing two of his most reliable journalists: Jennings, who died of lung cancer in 2005, and then Jennings’ replacement Bob Woodruff (an associate at Sherman & Sterling before joining ABC as a correspondent covering the Tiananmen Square incident), who was injured by a bomb blast while reporting in Iraq early the next year. Woodruff has recovered and is now working for ABC News as a correspondent.

Even when considering that turmoil, it doesn’t look like Westin’s job is going to get any easier. The confluence of world events and economic pressures will surely produce historic news for his journalists to cover, while also making decision on the business end of ABC News much more difficult, with “softening in advertising,” and staff cuts looming.

“We saw a dip in ad revenue first in local television,” says Westin. “But then it worked its way into the larger market. It hasn’t gone off a cliff, but clearly 2009 will be very challenging. My job is to adjust where we need to so that we can take advantage of the downturn. When something is as universal as this is, it frees one up to make needed changes.”

Despite what is expected to be a tumultuous economic year, Westin says he

remains committed to the journalism profession: “I enjoyed private practice. It was good to me. If someone today said ‘you’re sentenced to going back,’ I’d be happy doing that. But this is where I want to be.”