

FROM *Peter Jennings: A Reporter's Life*

edited by Kate Darnton, Kayce Freed Jennings & Lynn Sherr

Jennings often fought for extended coverage of topics that he felt couldn't be adequately explored during the thirty minutes of World News Tonight. He created a documentary series, Peter Jennings Reporting—prime-time ABC News specials dedicated to a single issue, from the pharmaceutical industry to US policy towards Cambodia to Christianity, all subjects that had seen little network coverage at that time.

TOM YELLIN: Peter had a particular passion for these documentaries. He wanted to use the leverage and the clout that he had created over an entire career, wandering the world, doing some extraordinary reporting, to do one more thing, and that was to tell people stories they couldn't find anywhere else. He shouldn't have done it because he should've enjoyed his life more. He had the opportunity to take off weekends, and not work at night, and not come in early, and not do all these other interviews, but he couldn't help himself. He just felt that this is what he had to do.

KEITH SUMMA: Peter's one of the few people I know who not only had the desire to do documentaries about stories that sometimes didn't fit television, but would want to jump into a complex public policy issue that didn't lend itself to television.

DAVID WESTIN: Peter loved doing hard things on TV. I mean, that was just an opportunity for him—not even a challenge, but an opportunity. If it was hard, that's probably what we ought to be doing, is the way he often came to it.

KEITH SUMMA: In 1994 we had done some really aggressive reporting at ABC and aired a bunch of different stories that infuriated the tobacco industry. In fact, Philip Morris sued ABC for ten billion dollars. As a result of that, there were a lot of people at ABC who basically made us back off the story.

Peter didn't like that. Peter never liked backing off a story. So he called all of us who were involved in that reporting together to sit down and said, "You have to prove to us that this reporting is sound." I remember having a breakfast meeting at his house with him, and he wanted to go over all the facts. When he was convinced that what we had done was sound, he said, "We need to continue reporting on this story." That's when he wanted to do a documentary about tobacco, which became "Never Say Die: How the Tobacco Industry Keeps on Winning."

This hour is about cigarettes and the people who make them, which means it is about the only product that you can buy virtually anywhere which, when used as directed, kills more than 400,000 Americans every year.

It actually only costs pennies to make one of these, and every year the five major cigarette makers make several billion dollars in profits. Tonight we're going to show you how the tobacco companies continue to prosper despite the damage these things do and despite the increased pressure the companies are under from lawsuits and proposed government regulation.

—*Peter Jennings Reporting* “Never Say Die: How the Cigarette Companies Keep on Winning,” June 27, 1996

TOM YELLIN: Peter took on the tobacco story for three reasons. First, I think he understood personally from his own experience as a smoker, and then as an ex-smoker, that smoking is enormously addictive and potentially very, very destructive. Secondly, I think he felt that smoking is the number one public health problem in this country, and that government, journalism, and industry were not dealing with it. The third reason he took it on was more personal: He felt, as the leader of ABC News, that ABC News had done some very courageous and very extraordinary reporting on the tobacco story, had been sued by a tobacco company, and had settled the law suit, even though, in his opinion, that was a mistake. So he felt it was important to continue reporting on this crucially important story, in spite of the attempts by the tobacco industry, which he felt were partially successful, to intimidate ABC.

When questions were first raised about the reporting ABC News had done about tobacco, which Peter was not involved in, but I was, he came to me and said, "What did you do? Did you screw it up?" I said, "No, Peter, we didn't." He said, "Okay, prove it to me." He was tough. He was as tough as any lawyer or any investigator. He asked every possible question that he could think of, and then he thought about it some more, and then he asked us some more questions. Once we could prove to Peter, to his own satisfaction, that our original reporting was accurate and that our original reporting was strong and supportable, he said, "We're not backing off this story."

This is one of the classic cigarette commercials from the 1960s. It was meant to convey the message that smoking made life better. And it was very effective.

TV AD: Come to where the flavor is. Come to Marlboro country.

But in 1967 the government ordered that television stations should also run public service messages, including this one, that advertised the dangers of smoking. They were also very effective, and people began to smoke less.

TV AD: Cigarettes... They're killers.

So what did the tobacco companies do? They agreed to a total ban on televised cigarette advertising, which meant, of course, stations didn't have to run those pesky messages that said smoking could kill you. And one year later, cigarette sales in America were up.

No one should underestimate the tobacco industry's determination to win. This hour is about an industry that never says die.

—*Peter Jennings Reporting* “Never Say Die: How the Cigarette Companies Keep on Winning,” June 27, 1996

TOM YELLIN: When it came to tobacco, I think one of Peter's great strengths as a journalist is that he wasn't sentimental. He really believed that the truth held its own virtue. And the truth about tobacco is devastating. I think Peter felt a profound responsibility in his role as one of the most important broadcast journalists in America to take that on. So what you see with the tobacco story was Peter exercising his full responsibility to use that to try to make a difference in the real world—to try to cover stories that will actually have an impact. He knew that if he did it well, something was actually going to change in the real world.

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JEANMARIE CONDON: We had run across some very interesting historical research on Jesus. One day I said to Peter, “Why don't we do a documentary about Jesus?” never thinking that he would say yes. I thought, they are never going to do a documentary about Jesus. But Peter went to our bosses, and he said, “I'm doing a documentary about Jesus.”

PAUL FRIEDMAN: When I heard about Peter's interest in doing a long-form documentary treatment about the life of Jesus, I thought to myself, “There he goes again. You know, one of his enthusiasms.” Nobody else would do this on commercial television, but good for him. It was one of the ways he used—but did not abuse—the power he gained as an anchorman.

DAVID WESTIN: Long before he came to me with the idea of doing “The Search for Jesus,” he and I had talked about the need for us to find ways of covering religion and faith. Now, I had thought, “Okay, we'll do more reporting on the Southern Baptists, or we'll do more reporting on conservative Jews, or we'll do more reporting on the Catholic Church.” It never occurred to me to take his penchant for being a reporter and say, “Well, what would a reporter do if he were reporting on the subject of Jesus?”

Now, it was a challenge. When I went to the network and the company and said, “Oh, by the way, we'd like to do, not one hour, but two hours, in search of Jesus. We're going to do reporting on a man that lived two thousand years ago, and may even raise some questions about the received wisdom of some organized religions about exactly where he was born, exactly where he lived and what happened,” that was tricky. This was long before things like *The Da Vinci Code*, and all of the other programs that have come along behind. In retrospect, it looks obvious, but at the time that Peter came up with it and pushed so hard for it, it was far from obvious.

TOM YELLIN: No one warmly embraced it in the corridors of power at ABC. What they said was, "I find that really interesting, but no one's going to watch." That's the kind of thing that drove Peter crazy. You couldn't say that to Peter because he believed that if you found something interesting, and he found it interesting, that's two people, so there have got to be millions more.

One of the things Peter loved as a journalist is to go cover the story that everyone else was ignoring. Here was the thing that's an essential question at the essence of the human experience, and no one was doing it. For a journalist, that's the ultimate opportunity. I think that's how Peter viewed it.

JEANMARIE CONDON: These shows allowed him to go back to the region, not just to cover wars and hijackings, but to get out into the desert and to climb around archaeological digs, talking about the Dead Sea caves and the Dead Sea Scrolls. He loved that. I remember we were leaving one of these archaeological sites and he grabbed my cell phone and he called his wife, Kayce. He said, "Darling, guess where I've been? I've just been walking around all day in the first century."

When Peter would read some of the stuff we'd written, where we'd really got into why we were doing it and what was important about it, he would have a hard time actually reading it without breaking down a little. I remember there was the conclusion of one act of our "Search for Jesus" show, he tried it five or six times. Every time he read it, looking at the pictures, hearing the music, he would start to cry. Today, if you listen to the show as it aired, you can still hear his voice cracking.

It is the man who inspired such astounding faith, such beautiful stories, whom we were looking for. What really happened, in this tiny corner of the world, during the brief time that Jesus lived here?

We kept looking and asking because something about being in this place, walking the same hills and roads that he did, standing at the sites people have venerated for centuries...it all gives you the strange feeling that maybe you can find the answers...if only you just look around the next corner, or the next one...or the next one.

—*Peter Jennings Reporting* "The Search for Jesus", ABC News, June 26, 2000

TOM YELLIN: Peter was not immune to the commercial pressures of broadcast journalism. When everyone was telling him that no one was going to watch this program about Jesus—it would be incredibly interesting, but no one was going to watch it—he was very, very nervous. What that meant was that the first fifteen or twenty minutes of the program had to be perfect. We did a version that we thought was great. Peter saw it, and he said, "Oh yeah, that's pretty good. Let's change it." We did another version. Same thing. Did another version. By the time we got to the twenty-fifth version—I'm not exaggerating—I thought we'd done it. We did ten more versions. There were thirty-five versions of the first act. That was a clear expression of Peter's anxiety, which was brought on by all these voices in his ear who were telling him, "No one's gonna watch this; no one's gonna watch it."

The first program we did about Jesus got huge numbers. Millions and millions of people watched it, many more than anyone thought.

The gospel stories describe Jesus impressing his followers by performing supernatural feats: walking on water, turning water into wine, and feeding thousands of people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. But most scholars we talked to think these stories were invented by the gospel writers as advertisements for Christianity in its early years. Christianity, after all, was competing for followers with Judaism and with Greek and Roman pagan religions.

—Peter Jennings Reporting “The Search for Jesus,” June 26, 2000

DAVID WESTIN: He was asking very basic questions, ones that cut very close to the bone, or very close to the heart, for millions of Americans. For those who believe in Jesus as the Savior, does it really matter whether he was born in Bethlehem or not? Is that really of the essence? He was asking some very tough questions, and there was criticism. I'll tell you just personally, I showed it to my mother in advance, and she was disgusted. She was offended by what was done because we were asking some of those questions and she didn't think it was appropriate, as a matter of faith.... Faith is not just an intellectual matter in this country. It's an emotional matter. And this captured that.

At the same time, Peter was doing something on the screen—or not on the screen—that he did when he was at his very best, which is that he was taking a subject we thought we knew about—taking a fresh look at it, and making us at least think, “Wait a moment, maybe there's a different way to look at this.”

JEANMARIE CONDON: When Peter got on fire with a topic, he would not let it go. He would grill anyone and everybody about what they thought about it. And even when the cameras were turned off, he kept going. You'd be standing on an airport line and Peter would turn to the person behind him and start grilling. I mean, imagine you're standing on line in the airport and this guy turns around and it's Peter Jennings. He's in your face, and for some reason he's saying to you, “What do you think Jesus really looked like?”

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While America tuned in to the O.J. Simpson murder case, Jennings insisted on covering a very different subject: the war raging in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He would eventually devote three hour-long prime-time specials to the conflict. From 1992 to 1996, ABC dedicated more time to covering Bosnia than any other network, largely due to Jennings's commitment to the story.

DAVID GELBER: I remember when I first came to ABC, one of the executives took me out for lunch and showed me minute-by-minutes, which are ratings tests of what people supposedly want to see and what they don't want to see. His point was that people want to see stories that directly affect them—liposuction, how to buy a cheap airline ticket. Americans don't care that much about stories like Bosnia. I think they were trying to enlist me on their side against Peter's determination to get the Bosnia story on the air. But Peter wouldn't hear anything about that. He understood the historical significance of the Bosnia story.

I wanted to go to Sarajevo because a great many people were being slaughtered in a manner which was altogether too reminiscent of World War II—a war from which we thought we were going to learn more, and after which the world said, “Never again.”

—*Peter Jennings Reporting* “The Land of the Demons,” June 18, 1993

TOM BROKAW: Yeah, he owned Bosnia in a way that I admired and envied. He got in there early, he saw what it was, and he became an important element in that story. Peter Jennings inspired coverage of Bosnia.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: He really understood the importance of America not walking away from the world after the end of the Cold War....He was always insistently interested in Bosnia, the Middle East, and Africa, but especially in the Balkans. He thought America had to get in there. He tried to make sure that the American people understood what was going on and the implications of it without ever going too far into editorializing news stories. He was good about that. I liked that.

The story of the Bosnian tragedy suggests that as America seeks to redefine its place in a world without a Soviet Union, the fear of appeasement has given way to the fear of quagmire. Can a world power build its foreign policy on such a fear? In Bosnia, two presidents have tried. George Bush decided that America must stay aloof and the war would be left to burn itself out and Bill Clinton came to pretty much the same conclusion. But the war didn't burn itself out and the public outrage that followed the more shocking scenes of massacre put great pressure on the White House to do something. By the time Bill Clinton was finally forced to act, the Bosnian tragedy had become infinitely more complicated and bloody....

And while America watched, hundreds of thousands of people died in a particularly evil kind of war. The Bosnians paid a very high price, but so did those who stood by.

—*Peter Jennings Reporting* “While America Watched: The Bosnia Tragedy,” March 17, 1994

DAVID GELBER: He believed and said very openly that if those were Christians or Jews being massacred by the tens of thousands in Europe, the world wouldn't have stood by and let it happen. So why should they stand by and let it happen because they are Muslims? Peter understood that, and that was one of the truest facts about what happened in Bosnia. The world stood by and watched Muslims being slaughtered, and Peter felt that that needed to be brought to people's attention.

This is the country we used to call Yugoslavia. Here, in the last three years, the world has witnessed the cruelest aggression in Europe since Nazi Germany. The United Nations has failed to stop it.

In the spring of 1992, the Bosnian government begged the United Nations to help protect its people against a brutal onslaught by the Serbian army. The United Nations refused. In Bosnia, town by town, the Serbs went killing and raping. Thousands of men and women were forced into concentration camps. Millions were made refugees. By the time UN peacekeepers arrived, there was no peace to keep.

—*Peter Jennings Reporting* “The Peacekeepers: How the UN Failed in Bosnia,”
April 24, 1995

DAVID GELBER: Peter didn't mince words. He said, “This is the biggest failure since the creation of the United Nations,” that is to say, the failure of the UN peacekeeping effort in Bosnia. He was right. Sometimes television reporters want to find some mealy-mouthed, weasel-worded way of getting around what is an evident truth. Peter did not pull any punches. He was very direct.

PETER JENNINGS: When the Serbs are shelling a civilian population, do you say, 'Ah, that's a war crime'?

LT GEN SIR MICHAEL ROSE: Of course. Any shelling of a civilian population is a war crime.

JENNINGS: And do you therefore feel, when it's occurring, that you have got to do something about it, that your mandate requires you to do something about it?

ROSE: We always do do something about it.

JENNINGS: Well, you don't, really, do you?

ROSE: We always do something about it. If there is a deliberate shelling of a civilian population by one side or the other, then we will use force against them.

JENNINGS (voiceover): But that is not what the general did. The shelling of Gorazde continued. The United Nations did not call in air strikes. And with no real threat to stop them, the Serbs unleashed an all out assault on the town.

—*Peter Jennings Reporting* “The Peacekeepers: How the UN Failed in Bosnia,”
April 24, 1995

DAVID WESTIN: Everyone recognizes that the American people, and therefore the American government, would not have been paying the attention to Bosnia that they did without Peter’s really putting the spotlight on that subject. Peter set an example that will go on having an effect on real events in the real world for years to come.

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