



William S. Paley: Innovator, Media Pioneer, Visionary 1901-1990

Mr. Paley is to American broadcasting “as Carnegie was to steel, Ford to automobiles, Luce to publishing and Ruth to baseball,” wrote Donald West in the New York Times in 1976.

Early Years

William S. Paley was born in Chicago on September 28, 1901. Upon graduating from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1922, he went to work full time for his family’s lucrative cigar business. A successful experiment with local radio advertising on WCAU led him to purchase the controlling interest in United Independent Broadcasters, a small, struggling network known on air as the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Paley’s vision, eye for talent, programming acumen, and keen business sense enabled the small radio network of independent stations to become the largest regular chain of broadcasting stations in radio history by 1929.

Quality Programming

Paley expanded CBS’s operations and influence rapidly. He adopted revolutionary new programming distribution models that attracted scores of new affiliates and advertisers, and aggressively sought talent for CBS programming. What set him apart from the other giants of early broadcasting is that he knew that the key to CBS’s success would be the quality of its programming; his great passion was for what went over the air. His eye for talent led him to lure to CBS the likes of Jack Benny, Red Skelton, and George Burns and Gracie Allen; among the unknowns he discovered were the Mills Brothers, Bing Crosby, and Frank Sinatra.

Developing the News

Always fiercely committed to the network’s news operation, Paley was a driving force behind the development of broadcast news. He pioneered the development of professional broadcast journalism, outlining rigorous objectivity standards and recruiting many talented young journalists—among them such celebrated figures as Edward R. Murrow, William L. Shirer, Charles Collingwood, Eric Sevareid, H.V. Kaltenborn, and Walter Cronkite.

The War Years

During World War II, Paley and President Roosevelt devised a plan to expand CBS’s shortwave broadcasting to Latin America in order to counter Nazi propaganda. Beginning in 1943, Paley, who was serving in the Office of War Information and would later serve as an adviser to General Eisenhower, coordinated Allied radio operations in North Africa and oversaw the restoration of broadcasting in liberated Europe.

From Speaker to Screen: The Tiffany Network

After the war, Paley combined the economic dynamism of post-war consumer culture with the soaring commercial potential of television. He guided CBS’s news and entertainment talent from speaker to screen, and after his notorious 1948 raid of NBC’s acts, he put together a roster so star-studded that CBS became known as the “Tiffany Network.” By the 1960s, CBS had become a global multimedia empire comprising television and radio broadcasting, music distribution, publishing, and ownership, briefly, of the New York Yankees. Every season Paley sought something that had never been done before that would push outward the frontiers of broadcasting, thus bringing such classics as *Studio One*, *Playhouse 90*, *The Defenders*, *60 Minutes*, *The Waltons*, *M*A*S*H*, *Dallas*, and many more to the air. Under his leadership, the CBS television network topped the ratings for twenty years.

Society and the Arts

Paley was a prominent member of society and a great friend of the arts. He kept company with the cultural and intellectual elites of Europe and America, and his second wife, Barbara “Babe” Cushing Mortimer, a New England society heiress, was one of America’s most glamorous women. A man of aesthetic sophistication and resolute civic-mindedness, Paley served for nearly two decades as chairman and president of the Museum of Modern Art, to which he bequeathed his sizable private collection.

In 1975 Paley founded The Museum of Broadcasting to collect, preserve, and interpret television and radio programming and to make these programs available to the public. The organization began with 718 broadcasts in its collection, with William S. Paley serving as the first chairman. In

1991 it was renamed The Museum of Television & Radio (MTR). In 2007, the board of trustees voted to rename the institution The Paley Center for Media to better reflect its evolution to a center that convenes media leaders and enthusiasts for programs that explore and illuminate the immense and growing impact of all media on our lives, culture, and society.

William S. Paley died in New York City on October 26, 1990.

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