

*The Red Smith Lecture in Journalism*

*John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy*

*University of Notre Dame*

# WHEN POLITICIANS MEET THE PRESS

*Tim Russert*



(Photo courtesy of the South Bend Tribune)

Tim Russert, Washington bureau chief of NBC News and moderator of *Meet the Press*, delivers the 25th anniversary Red Smith Lecture in Journalism at the University of Notre Dame on April 14, 2008. Seated are Terence Smith, noted print and broadcast journalist, who spoke about his father, and Robert Schmuhl, director of the John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy at Notre Dame and founder of the Smith Lecture series in 1983.

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# THE RED SMITH LECTURE IN JOURNALISM

Introduction  
By Robert Schmuhl

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## UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy  
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The Red Smith Lectureship in Journalism is sponsored by John P. and Susan McMeel and Universal Press Syndicate. The Lectureship seeks to foster good writing and to recognize high journalistic standards.

In the words of John P. McMeel, chairman and president of Andrews McMeel Universal (parent company of Universal Press Syndicate), "Red Smith's writing continues to offer lessons about stylistic and professional accomplishments that remain valuable to students and to journalists."

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# Introduction

**“D**ying is no big deal,” Red Smith once remarked, eulogizing a friend. “The least of us will manage that. Living is the trick.”

Tim Russert excelled at that trick. Whether appearing on camera, speaking to an audience, or talking over the phone, he gave life a sprinter’s kick and animation a new standard of measurement.

That’s why news of Russert’s death on June 13, 2008, shocked millions, not only for its untimeliness but also for its unbelievability. Life’s opposite seemed so out of character.

Two months before that tragic day, Russert kept a five-year promise to deliver the 25th anniversary Red Smith Lecture in Journalism at the University of Notre Dame. Despite a presidential election year and the prolonged nomination battle in the Democratic Party between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, he never wavered from the commitment. His only concern was whether he’d have enough time to prepare a talk that would subsequently be published after his visit on April 14.

As he’d done for other institutions and causes with energetic generosity, Russert befriended Notre Dame, returning to campus often—even serving as commencement speaker (and honorary degree recipient) on relatively short notice in 2002. He knew the Smith Lecture honored the University’s most revered alumnus in journalism and that 2008 marked a special milestone in the series.

Since 1983, a year after Smith’s death, his alma mater has remembered the great sports columnist and prose stylist in a continuing way—featuring public lectures by prominent practitioners commenting on the craft of writing and the state of American journalism. A list of all Smith Lectures concludes this booklet.

Like most sportswriters, Red Smith loved records and statistics. In Tim Russert’s case, he was the longest-serving moderator of the longest-running network program in television history. Indeed, since taking over as searching questioner of NBC’s *Meet the Press* in late 1991, he turned it into the highest-rated Sunday public affairs production and the most quoted news broadcast in the world.

Sunday mornings won’t be the same again, but neither will election nights in November nor the preceding days, when Russert analyzed American political life with lucidity and perception on *Today* and *NBC Nightly News*. NBC’s Washington bureau chief knew that city and his nation with a rare insight that enhanced democratic understanding and practice.

Away from the bright lights and bureau responsibilities, he also became the celebrant and laureate of fatherhood, as his best-selling books—*Big Russ and Me* (2004) and *Wisdom of Our Fathers* (2006)—prove on each page.

Tim Russert never had the chance, as he'd hoped, to revise his Smith Lecture for publication. What's here is the transcript of his last major statement about journalism, which he delivered before a packed Washington Hall audience that memorable evening.

The event itself and this booklet are made possible through the enduring support of John and Susan McMeel of Kansas City, Missouri. John, a son of South Bend, Indiana, and a 1957 graduate of Notre Dame, is chairman of Andrews McMeel Universal, parent organization of Universal Press Syndicate, provider of popular columns, features and comic strips to all forms of contemporary media. McMeel also serves on the Advisory Council of the College of Arts and Letters at Notre Dame, as well as on the Advisory Committee of the University's John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy.

Thornton Wilder once wrote, "The highest tribute to the dead is not grief but gratitude." American journalism will be forever grateful for Red Smith and Tim Russert.

—Robert Schmuhl, Director

John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy  
University of Notre Dame





# TIM RUSSELT WHEN POLITICIANS MEET THE PRESS

The world of politics may have the Kennedys, the Bushes, and the Clintons, but we journalists can proudly lay claim to the Smiths, Red and Terry, father and son, whose clear, cogent, thoughtful, and engaging prose informed, inspired, sometimes even provoked an appreciative reader—and so too, I hope, when politicians “Meet the Press.”

This is the 60th year of *Meet the Press*. People often ask about my favorite interview. I’ve read all of them or watched the video that is available, but my own personal favorite happened in the middle of a presidential campaign in May of 1992.

George Herbert Walker Bush was running for reelection. He was in second place in the polls. In third place was the presumptive Democratic nominee, William Jefferson Clinton, and leading the polls was Ross Perot.

He walked into the studios in May of 1992, sat down, and the program began. I said, “Mr. Perot, welcome to *Meet the Press*, your first appearance. You are an announced candidate for president. You have said the deficit is the most important problem confronting our nation. What is your solution?” He said, “What?”

I said, “This is the way it works. You announce you’re running for president. You identify the problem, and then you offer a solution.”

He said, “Now, then, if I knew you were going to ask me these trick questions, I wouldn’t have come on your program.”

And so our exchange began, and he was rather feisty. The program ended, and he left, and so did I.

I caught a shuttle flight from Washington to New York. The flight attendant ran down the aisle, and she said, “That interview with Ross Perot was unbelievable. What do you think of him?”

I said, “Ma’am, unlike a lot of places on talk radio or on cable news and now the Internet, I really don’t offer my personal opinions. I try very hard to offer objective questioning, so that you, the viewer, the voter, can listen, and come to your own judgment. But I am endlessly curious—as a viewer, as a voter, as a flight attendant, what did you think of Ross Perot?”

She paused, put her head down, looked up, and said, “He strikes me as the kind of guy who would never return his tray table to the upright position.”

And so it began. *Meet the Press* started on television in 1947, co-founded by Lawrence Spivak, and yes, a woman, Martha Roundtree. I had the opportunity to meet with Mr. Spivak before he died and talked to him about *Meet the Press*, and what he saw as the mission when he started the program. He said, “It’s simple. I learn as much as I can about my guests and their positions on the issues, and then I take the other side, and I do it in a persistent way, but a civil way.”

I knew then that it was a mission that I wanted to accept and adopt. Now, times have changed. The candidates or politicians who come on *Meet the Press* have far more handlers and pollsters and spin doctors than they used to.

There are some legendary interviews with Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana, who became the majority leader of the Democrats in the Senate. At one particular time, the questioners actually ran out of questions because Senator Mansfield would say, “Yep,” “Nope,” “Maybe.”

No more. I now am forced to put things on the screen. How did that happen? I will say to a guest, “I’m sorry, Congressman or Senator or Governor, but what you just said is much different from what you promised people when you were running for reelection.”

"Oh, no, Tim, you're taking that out of context. You're misquoting my words."

"No, no, Senator, I have it right here."

"Tim, I'm sorry, your viewers would be very disappointed at the way you're treating me this morning."

It got to a point where one well-known congressman from Texas came on and he said, "No, you're misquoting me," and I said, "Sir, I have a press release from your office right here." His response, "Oh, I said it in writing, okay."

I realized then that precision of thought and words was necessary, and so now we show the guest's own words. Think of the vocabulary of Washington we have lived through. Tax increases became "revenue enhancement." Misleading someone became "that statement is no longer operative."

These are challenges to us, and the more vehicles or tools we can use to frame an issue for the viewer by saying, "Senator, this is exactly what you said, in your own words. Let me play the video." It's not as a form of "gotcha," but as a way to demonstrate that "says here" is an opportunity to show us your intellectual journey or, if in fact you've changed your mind, explain it to us.

I am continually surprised that more politicians do not say, "I have changed my mind. I did say that four years ago, but let me explain what I have learned since then, and why I will vote differently next week."

I believe the country would salute such an opportunity to be open-minded and a willingness not to be a slave to this notion of consistency.

I also had the opportunity to interview the philosopher-king of the English language, my boyhood idol, Yogi Berra. He had written a book on baseball and on the things that he had said. So my first question is "Yogi, did you really say the things they say you said?"

We all know the most obvious ones—"When you come to a fork in the road, take it," or "No one goes to that restaurant anymore because it's too crowded."

So I asked his son, Larry, Jr., "Is this real? I need to know in terms of preparation for my interview." He said ask him about the pizzeria.

I said, "Yogi, I am told you went into a pizzeria and ordered a mushroom and pepperoni pizza." The waiter said, "Would you like that cut in six or eight slices?" Whereupon Yogi said, "Six. I can't eat eight." A precision of language, yes, but a logic

the Holy Cross fathers would, I think, find lacking.

Much has changed in the 60 years of *Meet the Press* or the 25 years since James Reston of the *New York Times* gave the first Red Smith Lecture in Journalism here at Notre Dame. Ninety percent of us no longer watch the evening news at 6:30. Back then it was Uncle Walter, Walter Cronkite, or Huntley-Brinkley, Chet and David, and yet I am convinced that viewers are now getting more information.

C-SPAN is different from *Larry King Live*. The information spectrum is broad and vast. There are blogs on the left, blogs on the right, and yet they're different from the editorial pages of the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* in terms of their tone and many times their civility. But, I believe, there is still a deep and abiding recognition in the value of the so-called mainstream media.

It's not enough to simply confirm your political views by only watching or accessing outlets that reinforce your views and do not challenge them. That is what I believe is a simple but important premise. Why?

Because all my discussions with presidents, both while in office and after they left, and their advisors, while in office and after they left, and in my reading of history, particularly presidential history, I am ever more convinced that a leader cannot make tough decisions unless he or she is asked tough questions. It is the only

vehicle that brings them to closure, that forces any sense of intellectual rigor, that forces them to find a way to reconcile the political advice or the political pressures brought to bear.

It will not be enough in a democratic society to simply have those on the left or right who are the pamphleteers and unwilling to challenge the views of people they support. Tough questions need not be the loudest or the most sensational or the most theatrical, but rather probing and, hopefully, incisive.

A case in point is the war in Iraq. There's been much discussion about the lead-up to the war and whether the appropriate questions were asked of our leaders.

I've had the opportunity to go back and read all the transcripts of the interviews on *Meet the Press* and many of the other programs. It is interesting to note that in October of 2002 when the vote was cast to authorize President Bush to go to war with Iraq, 80 percent of the American people supported that effort, two-thirds of both houses of

Congress voted in favor of that resolution. Why?

There was a consensus that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and that was not only put forward by George Bush, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, and Colin Powell, but it was also accepted and adopted by Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Chris Dodd, Joe Biden, and practically the entire leadership of the Democratic Party.

We now have learned there was a National Intelligence Estimate that was made available to members of Congress that contains some caveats, particularly from the State Department and some from the Energy Department, which questioned whether or not the case was a slam dunk—in George Tenet's phrase—that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. But that document was classified and not shared with the public or the press.

During the lead-up to the war, I thought it was imperative to ask our guests to explain as clearly as they could their judgments in wanting to go to war with Iraq. The Sunday before the war began, Vice President Cheney came on *Meet the Press*, and there were a variety of assumptions that he was laying out.

The first was that we would be greeted as liberators, a phrase that became infamous. At that time, I said, "Mr. Vice President, what if you're wrong?" I asked about General Eric Shinseki, the Army Chief of Staff, who said it would take several hundred thousand troops to maintain security in Iraq. He said, "I disagree; that is an overstatement."

I asked about the cost of the war, then estimated to be about a hundred billion dollars. He said that would not be the case, that oil revenues would be available to pay for a significant part and cost of the war. Lastly, I asked about the Shiites, the Sunnis, and the Kurds—and whether they would be able to come together in a democracy. And he said of all the places in the world facing a similar situation, he was convinced that Iraq was uniquely situated to do this.

At that time, there were no right or wrong answers. In hindsight, many people say, "Why didn't we say, 'You are wrong, Mr. Vice President?' Why didn't you challenge him and say, 'Of course we're not going to be greeted as liberators?'" Why?

Because that's not my job. As a member of the mainstream media, as the moderator of *Meet the Press*, my job is to find out, to draw from my guests their thinking—what are we doing about Iraq and why?

Liberators, the size of the force, the cost of war, whether or not there would be ethnic reconciliation or strife. Those were the issues then. E. J. Dionne, Jr. of the *Washington Post* now says that this exchange is probably the most revealing document that exists about the mind-set of the Bush administration in going to war. The easy thing for me to do at that time would have been to be bombastic and theatrical and say, "What are you doing? Why are you doing this to our nation?"

Again, it is the line that I think is so important to observe for those of us who are in the mainstream media. We need to do as much preparation as possible in order to ask challenging questions, so that we can have an opportunity to go back and make a judgment as to whether the judgments of our leaders, our policy makers, were accurate.

You can raise questions as to whether or not the Democratic Party should have been more in opposition, but that's a political question and not a journalistic one. I had people in opposition to the war on *Meet the Press*. They were not the leaders of the Democratic Party, because they had chosen to support the war.

This is the first time since 1952 that an incumbent president or vice president will not lead the ticket of one of the major parties in a general election. It's the first time in 80 years that an incumbent president or vice president is not seeking to lead one of those tickets. That's why there were so many candidates running. That's why there is such intense interest in this race, and it is only intensified by the fact that there is an opportunity for the nation to elect its first woman or its first African American as president.

But it is not enough to simply cover the history or cover the drama or, I dare say, cover the faux pas, although they are a necessary part and ingredient of our coverage, because it gives us an insight into the way a candidate reacts and withstands pressure and adversity.

I do believe, however, that issues in 2008 are so important to cover, just as they were leading up to the war in Iraq, and they are enormously significant as we sit here tonight. Think

about the big differences on the big issues that we in the mainstream media have a firm obligation to cover.

Take the war in Iraq. John McCain says that we will stay until we achieve victory or success, and we will have a presence, perhaps diplomatic, but a presence in Iraq for 50 to 100 years. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton say that we must get out by calendar year 2009 in a significant way and done in an orderly way, but in an emphatic way.

Both of those candidates must be asked, "What happens if a full-scale civil war erupts, and there is a complete breakdown in Iraq with significant bloodshed and atrocities? Would you then maintain the right to reinsert American troops?"

Or, to John McCain, we need to know, "How long will you wait for victory and success, and how do you define victory and success?"

There is no right or wrong answer. The question may be even more important than the answer, but it must be asked, so that you the voter, you the viewer, have an understanding as to what is at stake in this election.

In my dad's words, you want to be able to take the measure of the candidates, to size them up, and then come to some conclusion, some judgment, as to whether or not you want to entrust them with the enormous power of sitting in the Oval Office and making a judgment about war and peace.

There's the issue of health care—over 45 million people without it today. How do we get health care to our people so as to avoid the enormously difficult and, dare I say, expensive proposition for tens of millions of Americans of using emergency rooms as the health care provider of first resort?

Immigration—15 million immigrants are here illegally. What happens? What should be their status? Should they be able to stay, and what about their children who were born here and who are American citizens? Would we break up or separate families? What do we do? These are questions that demand answers.

Or take energy independence, where a nation is so concerned about a war on terror and our national security—and justifiably so in light of what happened to us at 8:46 a.m. on September 11, 2001—and yet reliant on oil from Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Iran, and Iraq. We all know what could happen overnight. We all know that Brazil decided to

fuel its entire automobile fleet on sugar cane, because they were concerned about reliance on imported oil.

We are the United States of America, and we must meet and talk about this challenge and what role alternative energy sources would play in that, not just wind and solar, but what about coal? What about nuclear? France, a nation that is perceived as liberal and progressive in its outlook, is getting around 80 percent of its power from nuclear. Is that applicable to our nation?

These are questions that I think define this race. Take Social Security and Medicare. Forty million of us now receive those programs. The baby boom generation is getting old and reluctantly admitting it, but there will be 80 million of us in the next 15 years. Forty million to 80 million on Social Security and Medicare.

When Franklin Roosevelt started Social Security, he was a genius. Why? He set the age of eligibility at 65. Why? That was life expectancy then. So you made it to the program for a month or two—and thank you very much for applying.

But now life expectancy is 78, 79, 80 years old. Double the number of people on Social Security and they'll be there for 15 years, and I've asked each of these candidates: "What are you going to do? How do we deal with that program now, so that people can plan for the next 15 years?" It was a Democratic president,

Bill Clinton, at Georgetown University in 1998, who said if we do nothing, we will have to double the payroll tax or reduce benefits by a third.

Both options are unacceptable, both to politicians and to the body politic. But there are a whole variety of other measures that can be taken. Democrats, Republicans, liberals and conservatives, all know it, but they are reluctant to talk about it, because they are afraid of being punished by the voters, and many journalists are reluctant to ask it because the subject "makes the eyes glaze over."

They asked Willie Sutton why he robbed banks. He said, "Because that's where the money is." There is no possible way that we can arrive at a balanced budget in Washington without dealing with the problems of Social Security and Medicare, and everyone knows it.

How do you prepare for this presidential race as a journalist or as moderator of *Meet the Press*? It is essential

that I do what I didn't do when I was in college. I had been taught that if I would read my lesson before class, show up at class on time or perhaps early, get a good seat, pay close attention, take copious notes, review my notes after class, the exam would be easy. I know they were right. I did not do it.

But it is what I do now each and every day. Newspapers are central to what I do, another form of mainstream media. They are invaluable in the work product, because of the number of people gathering the news and the resources they generally have. I read the *New York Times* and the *Washington Times*. I read *The New Republic* and *The National Review*. I read *The Nation* and *Human Events*.

I read left, right, and center. Many of my friends say that I now have confused myself, and they might be right. But I think it is imperative for an independent journalist, someone who is trying to ascertain to the very best of his or her ability what is the truth of the candidates' positions. What is their consistency? What is their intellectual grasp and understanding of the issues confronting us?

We need to accept another premise, and that is neither party nor any ideology has a monopoly on good ideas or the truth. It is essential that we come to grips with that, whether the president is Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton or John McCain or Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama. Our mission does not change.

I spoke to David Brinkley, an icon on Sunday morning public affairs television for some two decades before I took over on *Meet the Press*. I said, "David, how do you take everything you learn in the course of a week and distill it into one hour on a Sunday morning?" He said, "It's impossible. You have to understand the limits of your medium, but recognize that most interviews on the weekday morning shows are six or seven minutes and on the cable news shows perhaps five or six minutes. So you have an oasis when we think of an hour on Sunday morning. But always understand the limits."

You are introducing subjects to people or presenting candidates or governors or senators or policy makers in the hopes that people will become more interested and more curious and want to know more about them and their positions on the issues. And this is where the Internet has been a blessing, because we can now link on our own Web site on *Meet the Press* to all the various writings and position

papers of the candidates that appear on *Meet the Press*.

But Brinkley went on, "Recognize that there are limits and never forget it." I said, "Well, give me an example, David." He said, "All right, fine. If Moses came down from the mountain top with the Ten Commandments today, how would television news cover that?"

I said, "I don't know."

He said, "Moses came down from the mountain top today with the Ten Commandments. Here's Sam Donaldson with the three most important."

I understand the limits of our profession, but it does not in any way deter us from trying to do our level best to draw out each and every politician or policy maker so that you, the viewer and the voter, can make an intelligent decision.

The criticism of the mainstream media is heated and many times warranted, and will only increase in the future. But it should not in any way be suggested that therefore the mainstream media are irrelevant or should not exist.

We are the equivalent of a referee, and the pamphleteers on the left and right are working us for a call. If they challenge our reports or challenge our analysis, they're hoping the next one goes their way.

I do not see any of these outlets or parts of the information spectrum as competitors. I believe they complement what we do. I am absolutely overjoyed that young people are watching Stephen Colbert or Jon Stewart, programs that I've had an opportunity to go on.

If people who would not be watching *Meet the Press* or reading the *New York Times* are instead deciding they want to engage in a political dialogue or conversation at 11:00 or 11:30 at night, I think that's constructive. I also have a deep enough appreciation and understanding of life and demographics that a Colbert or Stewart viewer today will be a *Meet the Press* viewer with a baby on his or her lap 10 years from now.

It is something I believe is imperative that all journalists understand that it is not in our interest to be critical of one another's work simply for competitive reasons. If someone from ABC or CBS has an interview with the president or the presidential candidates and does a good job, it is imperative that those of us in the same profession applaud and salute that, and not to deride it out of competitive jealousy. It is essential that the politicians understand and the pamphleteers understand that we hold our mission,

protected by the First Amendment, as near and dear as they do hold their mission to elect their candidate.

People often ask how difficult all this is. Compared to walking backwards in the snow and the wind to grammar school when I was in south Buffalo, this is easy. I often think about the lessons I learned growing up with my dad, my mom, and my three sisters.

I lost my mom a few years ago, but my dad and three sisters are still here. They are to me the cheapest and most accurate focus group a journalist could have because their thinking is undiluted by official Washington. They look at things from a very commonsense perspective and are very willing to share their candor with me.

My dad is someone who is extraordinary in my life. He went to war when he was just 18 years old, World War II, and was terribly hurt when his B-24 Liberator crashed. He spent six months in a military hospital, and then he came home and met my mom and started a second mission—and that was to raise and educate their four kids.

My dad worked two full-time jobs for 30 years as a sanitation man and as a truck driver for the *Buffalo News*. He introduced me to a newspaper at the youngest of all ages. My memory of my dad, taking just an hour break between his jobs, is him sitting in his chair reading a newspaper cover to cover.

And my mom would bring us to the kitchen table to do our homework. We never had play days back then. We would go out in the street and play until 4:45, and then we knew we had to be home, and we had to do our homework while she cooked supper.

We couldn't trade our pencil for a fork until she had signed our homework every night, underscoring the emphasis she placed on scholarship and achievement and finishing our assignments.

All those lessons that are so central to what I do today were reinforced at the earliest ages in school, and so when a politician gets to "Meet the Press," he is also meeting Sister Mary Lucille, who summoned me to the front of the room in seventh grade with one of these suggestions, "Timothy, we need to find an alternative vehicle to channel your excessive energy."

So she started a school newspaper and made me the editor and the chief writer and the stapler and the collator

and the mimeographer. But I fell in love with it, and I became a much better student because of it, and when President Kennedy was assassinated we sent off a special edition to Washington and received a standard reply, I'm sure, from President Johnson, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy, which I still have today.

It was for me the first time there was a nexus between the written word of a little boy from Buffalo and official Washington, and because of my work on that paper, I was awarded a scholarship to Canisius High School, a Jesuit High School, where I encountered the likes of Father John Sturm, the prefect of discipline, and when you "Meet the Press," you are also meeting Father Sturm, because he threw me against the lockers for some perceived indiscretion my first few days at class. I said, "Father, please, I'm new here. I'm still trying to master all the various requirements of a Canisius student. Don't you have any mercy?" He said, "Russert, mercy's for God. I deliver justice."

And so the creativity is Sister Lucille, the accountability is Father Sturm, the hard work and the discipline are instilled by Mom and Dad.

I have no doubt that the SAT scores of the incoming class at Notre Dame and probably most people in this room are far beyond my reach, but the one thing that I do know is that the preparation that is necessary, and that we are all capable of, is the absolutely true essential to being a good journalist, particularly when a politician is going to "Meet the Press."

I want to know more about issues than they do, so if they attempt to suggest to the viewer, the voter, that there's an easy path or a way that doesn't quite add up or something that sounds so easy and convenient and simplistic because it is, I'm in a position to call them out and try to bring them back to a point where they're giving an honest answer to an honest question.

As long as I have a microphone, I will endeavor to do that—to question our leaders aggressively and persistently but always in a civil tone, to try to explain our politics and policy in a meaningful, understandable, and I hope, even an interesting way.

I believe that is the ultimate affirmation of the legacy of Red Smith, and I also believe an affirmation of the values of this wonderful place that we call Notre Dame.

Thank you.