

# The Loneliness of Eric Sevareid

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Sevareid was a somber man. In spite of his enormous talents and all his successes, he seems never to have relaxed into his life. It's never a breezy business reading Sevareid when he is in his fully serious mode. When Sevareid is really trying to make sense of the world, the war, the problematic rise of America to world power, the tension between America's immense promise and its actual performance as a great power, at home and in the world, he is not usually so much *expressing* insight as *seeking it* through the process of writing. He is thinking out loud on paper. Sevareid seems to have believed that the world is knowable, that it is possible to make sense of the course of human events, that events are neither random nor inexplicable; but at the same time he was aware, and he made sure we are aware, that things are very nearly inexplicable and that only a deep background in the humanities, a lifetime of careful reading and observation, and a genuine discipline for articulation and analysis, will get at the truth. For Sevareid nothing is ever quite what it seems. Something else is always going on, and the job of the reporter was getting at it.

Yet sometime there were things that even Sevareid could not get at. He admitted that his greatest struggle during World War II was to identify with the American soldiers fighting on the battlefields, "to truly experience and understand what all these men of my generation were undergoing, to get inside their minds and live there." This is perfectly understandable, but the moment Sevareid writes these words, the reader is pretty sure that a sad, but characteristically candid, acknowledgement of the failure of this project is sure to follow. Which, immediately, it does: "While with the armies I had awakened almost every day with the feeling: You haven't quite captured it; it still evades you." Sevareid has the integrity to confess defeat: "But the whole experience at the fronts had come and gone, and I never achieved the feeling that I had arrived in the realm of common identity with the soldiers. By now I knew it would never happen." Few writers are this honest.

Sevareid told the hard truth in one of the last broadcasts he made from Europe. "Only the soldier really lives the war. The journalist does not. He may share the soldier's outward life and dangers, but he cannot share his inner life because the same moral compulsion does not bear upon him. The observer knows he has alternatives of action; the soldier knows he has none. It is the mere knowing which makes the difference. Their worlds are very far apart, for one is free, the other a slave." Then the conclusion: "I'm sorry to say, that is also why in a certain sense you and your sons from the war will be forever strangers."

This broadcast represents the ultimate admission of the futility of writing. For what does a writer do but try to put the reader into a scene that the reader did not share? Most writers experience the feeling that they cannot quite communicate what it is that they most want to say. Few writers admit this so painfully and candidly as did Sevareid in the autumn of 1944 at the end of the war that occupies so much of his memoir.

Ah, but here's the ironic and remarkable sequel. After delivering this commentary on CBS Radio, Severeid feared that he had said too much, gone too far, been too candid, presented himself in a narcissistic and self-indulgent way. He feared a backlash—from listeners or from the CBS management. Instead, he received more positive mail for that broadcast than for anything else he had uttered during the war. His secretary in New York wrote to say, "I have never seen such mail on my desk. You must have reached the hearts of millions." Severeid was puzzled, troubled, and reassured by the broadcast and the public response it inspired. I believe this experience—which he more than half expected to backfire—actually empowered Eric Severeid for the rest of his long and distinguished career. I believe he realized, at this moment, and in a handful of other moments like this, that what the public wants is not just information, reportage, and perspective, but sometimes, on special occasions, to glimpse carefully into the soul of the reporter. Those who make a habit of this—Tom Snyder, perhaps, or Geraldo Rivera, or, some would say, Dan Rather—pay the price and come to be regarded as narcissists or exhibitionists. Severeid walked the line perfectly for 33 years, but never without anxiety about what losing control of his tightly protected inner identity might portend.

As the war wound down in France, Severeid shared a victory dinner with a group of local aristocrats and resistance fighters. He described the evening with his usual mastery. "They talked too loudly and all at once, they drank far too much, proposed foolish, sentimental toasts, embraced on another and each other's wives. It was all wonderful, and never to be forgotten, a moment for the brave heart which life would not repeat." And then the inevitable detachment. "They included me, the onlooker, in their happiness, but along with sharing their spirit I experienced a sense of hopeless envy; I would rather have been one of them than anyone else upon earth."

But he wasn't.

I believe the war scarred Eric Severeid more than he ever admitted.

*Not So Wild a Dream* is decidedly not the book of a young man who had the time of his life covering the war in Europe, first in 1939-40 and later in 1943-45. It is the book of a man who was horrified by what he experienced and scarred by it in some way that was not debilitating, but that clouded the lens for the rest of his life.

Severeid would be the first to insist that he did not really experience the horror of World War II, because he was observing the war not fighting it, and because he could withdraw whenever he wished to, unlike the men in uniform. Fair enough. That's how he saw it; it is not necessarily how we should see it. It may be that his experience as an observer actually brought him to see and feel things that the soldiers he traveled with—caught in the moment, indifferent (most of them) to the meaning and the causes of the great war—could not or did not see. In other words, it is possible that a remarkably sensitive and morally acute observer, like Severeid, embedded in the heart of the action, and liberated from soldierly duty from the tyranny of military orders and the claims of the immediate, saw more than common soldiers had the luxury of seeing, and therefore experienced the raw horrors of war more than the busy soldiers around him could take in. He would reject such an analysis, but that doesn't rule out its validity.

Sevareid's description of the reprisals of the French citizenry against collaborators, quislings, and Vichy members and sympathizers is chilling. A fair portion of the end of the memoir is about the liberation of France and the dark energies it unleashed among the French citizenry. After watching a large crowd, including young children, witness the execution (by a firing squad) of six collaborators in Grenoble, Sevareid pauses for reflection: "The scene was barbarous. A mob? The people were the citizens of Grenoble, who had always raised families, gone to church, taken pride in their excellent university of higher culture, and done no general hurt to humanity before. Was the important thing the way they had behaved, or why they had so behaved?"

Many of Sevareid's fellow reporters condemned the reprisals. Sevareid could not bring himself to do so. When he got back to the press camp at Grenoble, Sevareid got into "a flaring argument with two well-liked colleagues who were outraged by what they believed was drumhead justice." He held his own, Sevareid was absolutely brilliant at argument. But later he wondered: "All normal authority was broken down in this upheaval of an outraged nation. To bow to the desires of the populace seemed to invite mob rule. Not to do so seemed certain to prevent any authority from taking hold and to invite chaos again." In other words, Sevareid had developed an anthropological understanding of war, revolution, restoration, and human nature. "What we were seeing was a moral renewal and regeneration through armed rebellion." He recognized that France could not recover from its colossal humiliation in 1940 and the social fracturing that attended the inevitable phenomenon of collaboration with the enemy *unless* there was a reckoning, a catharsis. He saw the violent reprisals, some of them barely warranted, as a necessary ritual of mob (or community) violence.

In Europe, Sevareid saw things from which one does not ever really recover: rape of women and children, the random slaughter of the innocents, hangings of children under ten years old, shootings of noncombatants, shellings of French and Italian buildings not because they had any strategic value, but because the American soldiers were bored or just for the fun of it, rotting bodies, the leer of violence in its most unrestrained forms. He observed much and condemned little. Thanks to his wide reading and capacity for moral detachment, Sevareid realized that when the dogs of war are unleashed, mayhem is certain to follow, no matter how carefully the military commanders labor to contain their soldiers, no matter how fully a nation subscribes to the Geneva Conventions.

In Chapter IV of *Not So Wild a Dream*, long before he saw the worst excesses of the war, Sevareid returns to the American heartland—to Wisconsin. His detachment is unmistakable. "Already part of my mind was somewhere else looking with objectivity at my own country," he writes. "I knew all this. I must have looked exactly like these boys on a hundred Sunday mornings at eleven o'clock. How imperceptibly but how completely one enters a new personal dimension! What mine now was I did not know, but passing through Wisconsin on Sunday morning I knew that I had been cultivated out of my natural roots, that I *really had no home* in the sense that my father's generation understood the word."

It is very clear that Sevareid indeed *had been cultivated out of my natural roots*. By leaving the blank rectangle that was North Dakota, and becoming over time a genuine citizen of the world, indeed one who had engaged in his deepest life experiences on a foreign continent, in foreign

nations, in a world crisis of such elemental intensity that nothing that came after could ever keep up, he became in many regards a man who “really had no home.”

When he returned to Europe to cover the war in 1944, he reflected on the possibility of a postwar brotherhood among the former combatants, cheered on by a better, less toothless “League of Nations.” Still, the characteristic pessimism asserted itself. “If all men are brothers, still all are alone and never to be entirely explored in their separate minds; if all must dwell in this one small house, still each must have his own room inviolate, and cherished private habits and dreams must suffer no rude invasion.” Again, the fear that the self will somehow be invaded.

When he saw young men die at the front in Italy, he wrote, “What right have I to live and urge them on in behalf of my beliefs, these children who die not comprehending.” It’s the same story. The brave young men who were fighting at the front did not, in Severeid’s view, really understand what the war was about. “They did not hate the concept of Fascism because they did not understand it. But they struggled on, climbing the hills, wading the rivers until they dropped, and sometimes, watching them die in ignorant glory, I had to fight and reason away sharp stabs of conscience.” Clearly, Severeid believed that he understood the causes and the dynamics of the war, but he was not fighting the war, even though he was at the front as an observer. And then again the detachment, which should not be confused with a journalist’s unwillingness to overuse the first person. “If this sight was discomfoting to an American, who cherished England, the behavior of his own countrymen in the foreign world was equally disturbing.

Even in the precise moment when World War II ended, Severeid could not surrender to triumph. At the conclusion of *Not So Wild a Dream*, he writes, “I knew I would never see a battle again. There was relief in the thought, but it was followed by another feeling, which I did not admit to myself for some time—a sneaking sensation of nostalgia and regret.”

Nostalgia and regret. This was Eric Severeid.