

Happy Birthday, Mike Wallace

Word for word, the best American broadcaster in history has to be Mike Wallace. The guy turns 87 in a few days and he's still hitting cleanup for CBS on Sunday night. Wallace must have some kind of Dorian Gray thing going on, because he looks 25 years younger than he is, and can still put your fanny on the canvas during an interview. Here's the absolute bottom line on Mike Wallace: If you see him in a restaurant, have what he's having.

For those of you without a calculator, Mike Wallace was around for Al Capone, Adolf Hitler, Hiroshima, the birth of television and all the chaos that followed. In the 1950's, he hosted a TV program called "Nightbeat" which featured confrontational interviews with the powerful and the pompous. My late father thought most TV guys were wimps and phonies but he liked Wallace. He thought the broadcaster had, well, manhood.

The New York Times reports that Mr. Wallace did his full complement of 20 stories this season on "60 Minutes." At his age, the man's public persona should be a likeness at Madame Tussaud's, not a slot in prime time. But, somehow, he continues to be the best interviewer in the business. A few weeks ago he brushed back steroid monster Jose Canseco to such an extent that Canseco pretty much repudiated the key parts of his tell-all-book. Jose never knew what hit him. Wallace picked his pocket and left him for dead.

This whole Mike Wallace deal is downright spooky. Even Dick Clark has faltered, but Wallace just keeps humming along. When he interviewed me last fall, I had to be on guard at all times. Any inconsistency, any statement I couldn't back up, any bit of hesitation, the guy was on it. I kept repeating in my mind: "The man is 86 years old, I am much younger and stronger. The guy can't touch me." A fairy tale. Wallace

controlled the interview.

To be honest, there are few television broadcasters that I respect. Most are politically correct robots driven by ego to do only what is best for them. In my 30 years of broadcasting, I have seen behind-the-scenes atrocities that would turn even Mike Wallace's hair gray. So my praise for Wallace does not come from a cheerleader.

Like most network news people, Mike Wallace is a liberal thinker, but he is not an ideologue. He's made some mistakes in his career, but everyone in the business has. Most of all, I believe Wallace is a fair man who does not go out of his way to hammer a person without cause. Maybe I'm wrong about this, but I've watched him closely for decades.

As everyone knows, the old school of broadcasters is closing down. Brokaw, Walters, Rather, Koppel, and maybe even Jennings are cutting back. In their place are some highly skilled people without much panache. Americans are incredibly distracted with all the new gadgets, and to get their attention, you almost have to break into their homes. The age of broadcast superstars is almost over. The age of "Who's that, again?" is just about here.

So, happy birthday, Mike Wallace; I hope you get some nice presents and a big cake. And, with all due respect, you know what you can do with those 87 candles. Throw them at Morley Safer. You, sir, need just one candle, signifying your status in the broadcasting industry.