

# The Man Who Wanted to be Walter Cronkite ... and Jay Leno

☒ Brian Williams may just now be finding out the high cost of making things up, but the seeds of his fall from anchorman grace were sown a long time ago.

At this point we don't know what motivated him to lie about what happened to him in Iraq in 2003. All we know is that the helicopter he was in was not hit by a rocket propelled grenade as he had often claimed.

Maybe he was trying to come off as a heroic war correspondent who was almost killed trying to get the news for his viewers. Maybe other NBC correspondents covering the war were getting more air time – and fame. And maybe Williams thought he had to “embellish” his story to compete. Who knows?

And who knows what other tall tales he might have told. Was he lying about seeing a body float past his hotel while covering Hurricane Katrina? What about when he was a teenager and supposedly was robbed at gunpoint in front of a church in New Jersey while selling Christmas trees? And there are other “What abouts ...”

All we know for sure is that he's been suspended for six months without pay. That'll cost him \$5 million – for now. Another thing we don't know is if he'll be back as the anchor of the NBC Nightly News or if he'll have a job at NBC or any other news organization ever again.

But the reason I say his problems started long ago, is because Brian William, I think, never really knew what he liked more: journalism or celebrity.

You can have both, that's for sure. In the United States of Entertainment even journalists have to be entertaining. They can't simply be good looking stiff in a nice suit reading a teleprompter. And when you reach the heights of anchoring a network newscast, recognizable to millions, celebrity tags along.

Someone who knows Mr. Williams tells me that he always wanted to be Walter Cronkite. But it's now coming out that he also wanted to be Jay Leno – or at least Jay's replacement.

According to the New York Times, "About five years ago, as NBC was contemplating who would eventually succeed Jay Leno as host of NBC's 'Tonight Show,' a surprise candidate raised his hand: Mr. Williams.

"Mr. Williams told top NBC executives that he was keen to pursue his ambitions in entertainment and comedy. They called the idea ridiculous, telling him that he was a journalist, not a comedian, and to stick to the news department, according to industry executives with knowledge of the discussions."

He didn't get the job, of course, but that didn't stop him from pursuing his entertainment ambitions, hosting "Saturday Night Live," and doing guest shots on NBC's "30 Rock" and CBS's Letterman late night show.

Journalists tell the unvarnished truth, or at least that's how it's supposed to work. Entertainers entertain. They tell stories that are interesting. And if they have to embellish, exaggerate or yes, simply make stuff up, there are no rules forbidding any of that. The only crime is not being interesting.

Williams was trying to fulfill both of his dreams – being a top-tier journalist and a top-tier entertainer. Oil and water don't mix.

So what happens now? Does he return in six months or is his

life as he knew it, finished? My guess is that NBC would like him to return – he was the number one network evening news anchorman, after all. That translates into a lot of money. If all this happened when Brian Williams was the number 3 anchor in a 3-man race, there'd be no suspension. He'd simply be canned.

But if it turns out he's a serial liar, he's done. Period!

Really good entertainers have a knack for convincing us they're telling an honest to God true story even when they're not. Really good journalists don't even try to fool us. They just tell us the truth.