

Bob Schieffer, Questions about Politics

Emmy-award winning political commentator and TV journalist Bob Schieffer is Southern Utah University's 2017 Commencement speaker on April 28, 2017. SUU recently met with Schieffer in his Washington D.C. office at CBS to ask about his life, the current political situation and advice for graduating students. The following is a transcription of the video edited for clarity.

Ellen Treanor: "Switching gears to politics a little bit, in 1957 Krushchev said your grandchildren in America will live under socialism. What is your view in 2017?"

Bob Schieffer: "Well I don't think we are. I don't think we are. He said that at the famous kitchen debate with then Vice President Richard Nixon. The United States won World War II not because we became like the Nazis but because of American values and American courage. That's how we won World War II. We put together an alliance that still stands today, NATO. We had the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after we won the war. We did all of these things with our partners who were with us in winning World War II, and by making friends of our enemies. Germany, Japan, some of our strongest allies today. That is how American democracy has survived. Not by going it alone, but by working with our partners who shared American values. It's still happening and that is still what is in place here today."

Ellen Treanor: "What responsibility do citizens of the United States have with keeping the press functioning and free and accountable?"

Bob Schieffer: "There are two ways to differentiate between a totalitarian society and a democracy like the one we have. First, in a totalitarian society, the only source of news is the government. Second, in a democracy like ours, citizens have access to independently gathered accurate information that they can compare with the government's versions of events. Then they decide, the citizens decide, what to do about that. If there were no other reason for having a free and unfettered press, that is reason enough. That's what we do, that's what our job is. We're not the opposition party as some would have it. We're not trying to run the government. Our role is to simply ask questions.

Politicians present a message. Our only job is to find out if the message is true and if so, how does it impact on the people? How does it impact on the governed, what does it mean? That's what we do, we do that by asking questions. I think when that's done correctly, it's a very noble thing. I know this, it is absolutely crucial to a democracy. Unless citizens have independently gathered information, they can't make informed decisions about what they want their government to do and what they want it to be. That's what makes all this work. That's why, when anyone, a foreign agent or someone within the government, or some politician aspiring to be in the government, tries to undermine a free press, it's a dangerous thing and they're undermining democracy.

Ellen Treanor: “Thank you. Perhaps you can help me phrase this question better. It has to do with discretion and how to make sure that you decide what’s the public’s right to know versus if there are some things that the government would rather keep confidential. Talk to me about that process.”

Bob Schieffer: “Well there’s always attention and there’s often a disagreement. My rule has been, always, if this is something that is going to impact in a negative way on people’s lives, and the only way to get that news out is to publish something that the government may have classified, then I think the press has an obligation to do that. But you have to be very, very responsible in how you go about this. The reporters I know in the mainstream media always are.

I can remember once when I was covering the Pentagon. A general who trusted me let me weed some information that was, by the government’s definition, classified. I looked up at him and said, ‘are you sure you meant to show me this’? What it was, was the list of the bombing runs that the B-52’s were going to make the next day. Well if I had published that, it would have put the lives of every pilot in danger. Of course I didn’t and he said, ‘oh my God I didn’t realize’. He just gave it to me by mistake. No reporter who has any responsibility is going to publish something like that. That’s always been my rule. We never, never should publish something that will put American lives in danger.

But you have to also understand that anybody in Washington who’s been here a while understands this. Sometimes the government will classify things just because it’s embarrassing to them. I remember one of my favorite stories of all time. I was walking through the Pentagon, there’s a commercial mall in the basement of the Pentagon and there are commercial stores. I was walking down there one day, I think I was going to get a hamburger or something in the days when I was covering the Pentagon. I look up at the Pentagon bookstore and there was a long line of people lined up in the bookstore. I thought, I wonder what that’s about. Some were in uniform, some were not, and so I just wandered in to see what it was. I walked in there and on sale, in the commercial bookstore in the Pentagon, was of all things, the Pentagon Papers, which a commercial publisher had published. Upstairs in the Pentagon, these were under lock and key and still classified top secret. I ran and got a camera crew, went down and interviewed the folks in line, and we did a story about it on the evening news. Walter Cronkite said to me, he called me after the show and he said, ‘Bob, if you hadn’t had pictures to go with that story, I wouldn’t have believed it’. That’s an example of sometimes the Pentagon classifies things, or all government does, to cover up mistakes. In those cases I think it’s justified.”

Ellen Treanor: “The cover up is always worse. So AMA has the hippocratic oath, what’s the journalist oath?”

Bob Schieffer: “To tell the truth. To understand that the politicians have a message and our job is to find the truth. Both are honorable endeavors, but they’re different. Our job is to make sure the governed understand what the governors are doing. People have asked me over the years if all reporters are biased. Well sure, everybody has a personal point of view. What reporters do is

they're trained professionals and they're able to separate their personal views from their professional responsibilities. I think for the most part, I think that's what most reporters do. Politicians often have an agenda. I think the agenda that most reporters have is to get the story, get it right, and get it before your competitor gets it. I don't think most reporters' agenda goes beyond that."