

Richard Salant, 78, Who Headed CBS News in Expansion, Is Dead

By BRUCE LAMBERT

Richard S. Salant, who headed CBS News for most of the 1960's and 70's during the tumultuous Vietnam and Watergate eras, died yesterday while speaking to a group in Southport, Conn. He was 78 and lived in New Canaan, Conn.

CBS said he suffered heart failure while giving a talk on news coverage to an organization of elderly people at the Country Club of Fairfield in Southport.

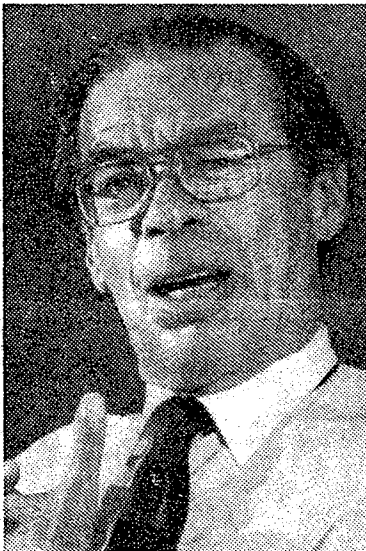
He was credited with raising professional standards and expanding news programming at CBS. He served as the president of CBS News from 1961 to 1964 and from 1966 to 1979. After reaching the mandatory retirement age of 65 there, he went to the rival NBC News as its vice chairman for two years.

During his tenure, CBS was the first network to expand its week-night news report to 30 minutes. Under his leadership, CBS also introduced "60 Minutes" and the "CBS Morning News" and "Sunday Morning" programs.

An Industry Leader

CBS became an industry leader under Mr. Salant, said Don Hewitt, the executive producer of "60 Minutes." He said the competition in those years "was not so much ratings but how many DuPont and Peabody Awards you could garner, and CBS was on top." The role of news organizations became an issue during the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. Mr. Salant was known as both a defender of the news media's First Amendment rights and a critic of what he considered the media's excesses and failings.

When CBS's broadcast of the five-hour "Atlanta Child Murders" in 1985 prompted debate on fictionalized versions of historical events, he said, "The problem with 'docudramas' is people don't know where the docu ends and drama begins."



1977

Richard S. Salant

Fending off critics in the defense establishment, Mr. Salant broadcast the documentary "The Selling of the Pentagon," which examined the military's manipulation of public opinion and the news media, including CBS.

Dan Rather, the network's evening news anchor, said Mr. Salant "wrote the book on integrity, ethics and excellence." Howard Stringer, the president of the CBS Broadcast Group, called Mr. Salant "one of the founding fathers of CBS News."

In retirement he remained outspoken. When Phyllis George, a former Miss America without journalism experience, was made an anchor, he said the move "demeans our business."

Mr. Salant's own promotion to head CBS News raised eyebrows because he was the first in that post without a journalism background, except for being editor of his preparatory-school paper and on The Harvard Law Review. His career had been as a government lawyer and corporate executive.

His actions soon dispelled the skepticism. Among his first decisions was to segregate CBS News from sports and entertainment programming.

'Probably the Best'

Fred Friendly, who served as CBS News president between Mr. Salant's two stints as president, said, "He was the only non-news person as head of CBS News, but I think he was probably the best we ever had."

Mr. Salant admitted some mistakes. He said that although he found Diane Sawyer "probably the most intelligent and best-read reporter I was associated with," he harbored "great reservations about hiring her — she was too beautiful, and there was that matter of her working for Nixon for three years."

Mr. Salant, a native of Manhattan, graduated from Harvard in 1935 and its law school in 1938. His first job was as a lawyer for the National Labor Relations Board in Washington, starting in 1938. In 1940 and 1941 he was the acting director of the Attorney General's committee on administrative procedure, and from 1941 to 1943 he worked for the Solicitor General.

In World War II he served in the Navy as a lieutenant commander.

After the war he joined the Manhattan law firm of Rosenman, Goldmark, Colin & Kaye, which had the Columbia Broadcasting System as a client. His relationship with CBS expanded until he joined its staff in 1952 as a vice president.

Mr. Salant's marriage to Rosalind Robb ended in divorce.

He is survived by his wife of 37 years, the former Frances Trainer; four daughters, Linda Breck of Tucson, Ariz., Susan Burdick of Singapore, Priscilla Salant of Moscow, Idaho, and Sarah Gleason of Darien, Conn.; a son, Robb of Tucson; a sister, Helen Isaacs of White Plains, and nine grandchildren.