

THE NEW GRIOTS AND GRIOTTES



My Uncle Gene was a Navy signalman in World War II. He was on the initial beach assaults at both Iwo Jima and Okinawa. He told me about his horrifying experiences in such granular detail, it was almost as if I had experienced them myself. Uncle Gene was our family griot, at least in terms of the history of the war that cost so many millions of lives around the world. Like the griots and griottes of West Africa, he passed important information to me, made me understand the reality of war, as opposed to the heroic versions from Hollywood.

Griots and griottes are responsible for preserving events, large and small, that have occurred over many generations, and they have been proven amazingly accurate at doing so. But these memory heroes from West Africa are more than a repository of a group's entire history: they also consult and provide historical context when a problem or crisis develops. Has this happened before? How was it handled? What was the outcome?

I believe Rachel Maddow is a modern day American griotte. Long before she had the great success she has today, she had the same methodology: present the historical

context of any current issue, scandal, or debate, in meticulous detail, searching all kinds of sources, including old newspapers and old television news broadcasts from the relevant period. In a *Variety* interview she said: "My show affords me a lot of freedom to do long segments and to unspool a lot of historical context if I feel that's what's needed to explain the day's news." Her motivation is to inoculate the public from the kind of brazen propaganda purveyed by Fox News and other right-wing media outlets. She is also just as likely to challenge the liberal media, as in her calling out the *New York Times* in 2016 for creating a false equivalency between the Hillary Clinton email server dust up and Donald Trump's many serious scandals.

Rachel Maddow's mantra is: "Increase the amount of useful information in the world." She, and other journalists who use her methodology, offers an alternative to "Google mind," where a quick look at Wikipedia or other sources (that may or may not have a political agenda) makes people think they've done enough background checking to go forward and make rational decisions. Maddow is a striking contrast to the hordes of pundits who migrate from

one cable network to the next and deliver somber expert insights that regularly turn out to be dead wrong. Maddow says she avoids cable news and opinion pieces, but gathers her entire staff every day for an "all hands on deck" meeting, including interns, to decide what that day's program should be. Including young people in these meetings shows that she, like the old griots and griottes, sees the education and preparation of new generations as a major part of her job.

As thorough as Rachel Maddow is, we need to look to ourselves as well. Every one of us is a witness to history. Sometimes it is a personal eye witness experience, such as those of the many people who have recorded police misconduct and other crimes on their smart phones. Sometimes we can call back footage we have seen years ago on television: the moon landing, the assassination of JFK, the destruction of the twin towers in 2001. I'm not talking about analysis or documentaries, but raw live footage of actions and events that have historical importance. The volume of our personal memories of such things is massive and amazing. We just have to access it.

You know more than you think you do. It takes just one discrete memory to find your way into a cluster of memories and begin to reconstruct an historical moment. For instance, I have a clear memory of a sneering, wire-bespectacled Donald Rumsfeld standing at a podium in 2003 and saying that the Iraq war would be over in “five days or five weeks or five months, but it certainly isn’t going to be any longer than that.” He assured everyone that a Vietnam style quagmire was impossible, and yet the Iraq war lasted longer than the Vietnam war. It could be argued that it is still ongoing. I remember Dick Cheney declaring that the American armed forces would be “greeted as liberators” by the Iraqi population. I also remember watching CNN’s live coverage of the first bombing of Bagdad; “shock and awe” was the administration’s term for it. The military show that night offered neither shock, awe, nor the promised quick surrender. It foretold the years of official stupidity, corruption, and ineptitude that characterized the whole fiasco. Then there was George

W. Bush jetting onto the deck of the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln on May 1, 2003 and announcing “mission accomplished,” many years before the main fighting ended. What about the conference the White House set up for people from the oil industry, giving them a heads up that there was much money to be made in new petroleum production after Saddam Hussein was eliminated? This was before the war started. And how could we forget the obscene profiteering of Halliburton, where Dick Cheney had formerly been CEO, including contracting work that electrocuted GIs in their showers?

I am aware that this was over fifteen years ago and that younger people might not have these memories. However, much of the rest of our population does. The millennials have many vivid memories of their own, including our too frequent mass shootings, at schools and elsewhere. But they can also add the history of earlier times to their memory banks. It is quite easy to search for old news footage, much of which is available online from ABC, NBC, CBS and

CNN. They can research the history that is most relevant to our current crisis. What could be more relevant to understanding the historical context of Trump and his outrageous “projects” than scrutiny of the Bush White House’s willingness to go to war for the personal gains they and their cronies stood to make? Trump and his sidekicks are not the first self-dealing politicians who have wrapped themselves in the flag as they betrayed the ideals of our country. And I say to skeptics who point out the hypocrisy of American idealism; those ideals have never been fully achieved, but they are magnificent and worth fighting for. If we let them go, we will lose our democracy and may never recover it.

We all can be griots and griottes by piecing together relevant stories and creating a better understanding of our historical milieu. We need to urge others around us do the same. Inertia, laziness, and the bread and circuses of social media, are the enemies of clarity and the handmaidens of authoritarian domination.

