



# Larry King— “Why, Who, What”



BY TED JOHNSON

**O**N A SHOW just before Memorial Day, Larry King wrapped up an hour with Donald Rumsfeld—in which the defense secretary was asked about everything from Iraq to national security to the new CIA chief—with one final, off the cuff question.

Do you watch “American Idol”?  
Rumsfeld laughed. “Heck, no!”

Few other talk hosts deploy such a freewheeling style—and few would have been able to snag the controversial Rumsfeld as a guest. Approaching his 50th year in broadcasting, King has become an institution not just for his potpourri of subjects, from politics, foreign affairs, entertainment and sports; but for his common sense way of interviewing. He asks the questions that an everyman would ask, a curiosity that comes across not as prying but as polite query.

As recipient of this year’s President’s Award, King is being honored for a career that has included more than 40,000 interviews, from Malcolm X to L. Ron Hubbard to Madonna, and most recently figures including former President Bill Clinton, actress Elizabeth Taylor, author James Frey and “Deep Throat” Mark Felt. “Larry King Live,” launched in 1985, is CNN’s highest-rated program.

“I could describe it as short questions, to the point,” King, 72, says of his style. “I never mean to embarrass. I am there to learn. I don’t want to know the answers that the guests are going to give. I don’t like pre-interviews. I like to be surprised. And I am curious about a wide range of topics. I would never want to do a show that is just politics or just entertainment or just sports. I like it all.”

The father of five children and married to singer/actress Shawn Southwick-King, King was particularly outspoken after a heart attack in 1987, which led him to found the Larry King Cardiac Foundation, raising millions to help pay for heart procedures for nearly 60 children and adults.

Born Larry Zeiger to Russian immigrants who settled in Brooklyn, N.Y., King recalls being engrossed in the “who, what, where, when” since a very early age.

“I would drive people nuts,” he says. “The bus driver: ‘why are you driving a bus?’ I was always

curious. I didn’t have to be mean.”

Broadcasting also became an early pursuit. He’s recounted a story in interviews of how he worked as a mail clerk for Associated Merchandising Corp., located in the same building as New York’s WOR, and he would ride the elevator up to the station’s floor just to be around the announcers.

At 22, he left for Miami, having heard that radio job opportunities were more plentiful there. He got a job with a small station, WAHR in Miami Beach, and in 1957 they gave him a shot as a morning disc jockey when one of the announcers quit.

The first show, he says, also was the last time he was nervous on radio.

“They had just given me my new name, Larry King, and I had all of my music prepared and nothing came out of my mouth,” he says. “I just couldn’t think of a thing to say. And I saw the whole thing, that dream I had had since childhood, evaporating. And the general manager of the radio station, the music kept playing, he kicked open the door to the control room and said, ‘This is a communications business.’”

“And what I did was I turned on the mike and I told the audience what I was going through. I told them this was my first day on the air. I told them how I never thought I would be nervous but I am nervous. I even told them that the general manager had kicked open the door. What I discovered was that if you are honest to your audience, if you take them into your situation, you can never be nervous.”

The owner of a well-known Miami restaurant, Pumpernik’s, took notice of the a.m. show and invited King to start a talk program from his eatery. No one was booked; he would just walk up to people and interview them. “Out of nowhere Bobby Darin walked in,” he says. “He hadn’t heard the show, and was entertaining across the street in the Deauville, and he was the first famous person I interviewed.”

Guests such as Danny Thomas and Jimmy Hoffa followed, and by 1960 King had been approached to start his own TV show. “The first night on TV, they had me in a swivel chair, and I kept swiveling. You could smoke then on television, so I smoked. The *Miami Herald* criticized the show by saying, ‘It is a swiveling smoke screen.’”

The kinks were worked out, and the show drew a loyal audience. He went national in 1978 with Mutual Radio’s “The Larry King Show,” an overnight program that not only allowed King to interview guests for several hours, but for listeners to call in and ask questions.

The “open phone America” format was adapted to his nightly CNN talk show, which quickly became one of the network’s signatures. Some of his programs became part of broadcast lore: The 1993 NAFTA debate between Al Gore and Ross Perot, a 1995 hour on the Middle East peace process with PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, King Hussein of Jordan and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin; and a 1994 interview with Marlon Brando.

Only once, he says, has he been intimidated by a guest, and that was only for about five minutes. “Frank Sinatra,” he says. “Because I used to watch him at the Paramount. And he didn’t do interviews. He was hard to get. He agreed to do it and then after that it was a breeze. It is just the same premise whether it is Rumsfeld or an insurance agent. ‘Why, who, what. Why do you do what you do?’”

Particularly challenging are guests who give short answers. Because of his age, Felt was difficult.

“Obviously he has some dementia,” King says. “All I could do there was the best I could. Obviously it was not easy. He gave short answers. He did not think in the abstract. On the other hand, this interview is going to be in the Smithsonian, and you realize, of course, that no one is ever going to see him again. And if any one wants to refer to it, 50 years from today, they are going to pull up the story of Watergate and they are going to show Mark Felt and that is going to be it. There is nothing else to show.”

As hard as the interview was, in querying Felt about the mechanics and motivations behind his actions, King did manage to slip in a question about the man who played him in the movie, “All the President’s Men,” Hal Holbrook.

KING: “Follow the money. Did you ever say that?”

FELT: “No. I don’t recall ever saying that.”  
We all would have wanted to ask it, too.