

Interview

A Place for Fairness and Civility

An Interview with David Gregory, Moderator, NBC's *Meet the Press*



David Gregory

EDITORS' NOTE David Gregory was named Moderator of *Meet the Press* in December of 2008. He also regularly substitute anchors for *Today* and *Nightly News* with Brian Williams, and is a regular contributor and analyst for those programs, as well as MSNBC. He joined NBC News in 1995, covered three presidential campaigns in 2000, 2004, and 2008, and served as NBC's Chief White House Correspondent during the span of George W. Bush's presidency. Previously, he worked as an NBC News correspondent based in Los Angeles and Chicago. Washingtonian magazine named Gregory one of Washington's 50 best and most influential journalists. He began his journalism career as a summer reporter for KGUN-TV in Tucson, Arizona. He also worked for NBC's flagship West Coast affiliate, KCRA-TV in Sacramento. Gregory graduated from American University in Washington, D.C. with a bachelor's degree in International Studies.

PROGRAM BRIEF As the longest running program ever on network television, *Meet the Press* (www.mtp.msnbc.com) has attracted attention based on its interviews with world leaders and U.S. headlines every Sunday morning on NBC since its premier on November 6, 1947 on NBC-TV. Since President John F. Kennedy deemed *Meet the Press* the "fifty-first state," every man who has occupied the Oval Office has appeared on the program during his career, as has every Vice President since 1952.

When you became Moderator of *Meet the Press*, you said, "above all, I want to make Tim proud," referring to the late Tim Russert. Did that add a lot of pressure to the role?

It did. It weighed on my mind heavily, literally and figuratively, because that early period was about measuring up in the audience's mind. Tim was at the height of his power and influence, so it was an unnatural position to be in after he had died. What was important for me initially was continuity with measuring up, and that is the pressure I put on myself early on.

It was also a tribute to the core of what *Meet the Press* was and what I still think it is, which is an agenda-setting, news-driving program, a place for accountability, and a place for fairness and civility. That is sort of the house that Tim built, and there were so many aspects of that that had to be maintained because it's what the audience expected.

But as I moved through that first year, it became very important for me to work to move beyond Tim and not worry about what he would think about certain things. That was a natural transition – that's what he did, and what he would expect of me.

Is it frustrating sometimes to get those direct answers to your questions?

Absolutely, and it's on me to do a better job trying to narrow the questions to force some real answers, to have the time for follow-ups, and to develop a line of questioning. A lot of politicians have come on who have talking points and it's my job to try to knock them off of those a little bit and get to something real. Sometimes I succeed and sometimes I don't.

Outside of your role as a Moderator, is it hard to be optimistic when you consider all the tough issues we are facing?

Just as a citizen, I worry about the inability to tackle really hard problems and move forward; I worry about a system that rewards paralysis. We have to be a country where strong leadership is rewarded for the right reasons and that the results are rewarded. But we have to take ourselves to task as Americans and not always just cast the blame on our leadership. We need to look in the mirror and recognize a lot of this paralysis is a result of our own predilections and the way we think about and respond to these issues. Faith in government is way down. A year ago, there were so many good feelings about the historic nature of the 2008 election, and yet

we're still in a very difficult place. When you see moments of great comity in Washington is after something horrible, where you see people come together. That is a great feeling for Republicans, Democrats, Liberals, and Conservatives. People want to see government in action and government working. I'm in Washington, D.C. where they still haven't cleared the snow off my street, and that is frustrating, because that is the job of government, and I think a lot Americans are looking up on a much grander scale and asking, why aren't things getting done?

I like to think that in my small way, I have a role to play in that. One of the directions I'm really committed to for the program is to ensure it's a place of constructive engagement, that there is constructive conversation about the things we've covered. It's a place where there can be a conversation that is not just about the argument but about the solution, because there is a great hunger for that.

Do you think the toll of media scrutiny might be keeping the best and brightest out of politics?

I hope, as a society, that this information revolution doesn't tear people down, because we're going to need leadership generation after generation. But I'm confident that that is still going to be there. We've seen some of this polarization within the media before in different forms, but I've got confidence that we'll get it right. Viewers and consumers in general are so sophisticated – they get the differences between opinion journalism and straight journalism, and what's going on online and in the blogosphere. The same is true of finding practical solutions to things. We're innovating a great deal in the country, we're doing a lot of the right things, but we have to work through these periods that are difficult, in terms of our politics.

When you joined NBC in 1995, could you have imagined now some 15 years later you would still be there, and what has made it a place you've wanted to spend so much of your career?

It really matters to me that I've grown up in this network literally and in my career, because of the relationships I formed, and the respect for the culture and the history of this news division. It's a place where I've been able to pursue my work in the way I wanted to while also being held to high standards, and where I've had incredible mentors like Tom Brokaw and Tim Russert. Having that kind of commitment and that relationship with one place and with one company matters to me. ●