

Published on *The Wrap* (<http://www.thewrap.com>)

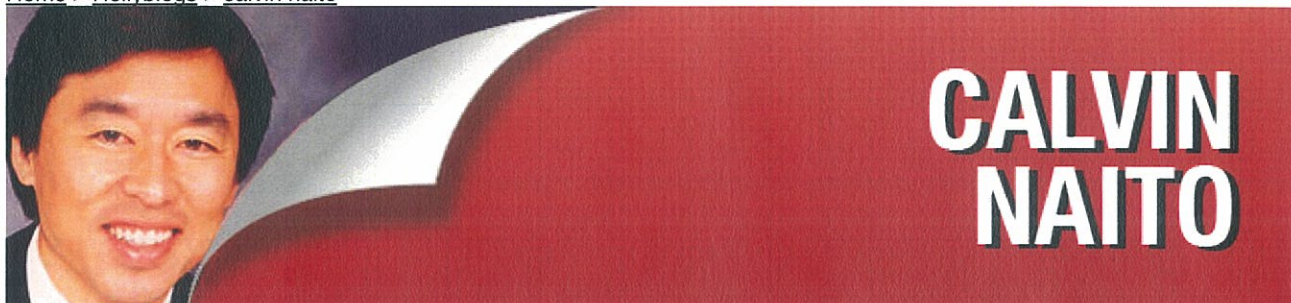
<http://www.thewrap.com/blog-entry/lesson-chandlers-adapt-quickly-change-or-lose-power-7882>

September 28, 2009, 12:04PM PDT

By: Calvin Naito

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Lesson from the Chandlers: Change or Lose Power

The TV documentary "Inventing L.A.: The Chandlers and Their Times" had the potential to have a big impact, but it probably will not, given its limited audience on PBS and the filmmaker's elitist and inaccurate storytelling approach. Despite having rich raw material, Peter Jones crafted an overly nostalgic and ultimately depressing product.

In spite of these flaws, every person in the Los Angeles-area and beyond should see this film, for embedded beneath the surface is an empowering message that can make an everlasting difference in all of their lives.

It is a story about power, great wealth, family feuds and politics. There are memorable characters in the multi-generational Chandlers, especially in Otis Chandler, the last one to run the Los Angeles Times and which the film paints as the most exemplary.

The panorama of Los Angeles history over the last century is presented with its heroes and villains. The idolatry of the Chandlers is contrasted by their less well-known dark sides: the misleading boosterism, the arguably unlawful real estate and water rights deals, the support of corrupt public officials, and the bias against labor unions and ethnic minorities, among other important issues. All this is dutifully included, ensuring that the script ostensibly has journalistic balance.

The social movements of the times are also presented, although the film unfairly diminishes the masses as mere extras to the Chandler leading men. Angelenos deserve more credit for shaping the region than the film gives them credit for. The people of the region shaped the Chandler's direction of the paper as much, if not more, than the Chandlers directed the masses.

Why then should the average person watch this film? The gem beneath the rough surface is the message that one must be vigilant and adapt quickly to change in order to maintain one's power and relevancy in a dynamic world. This would have been a timely theme to explicitly center the film around, especially given the extreme societal shifts that are disorienting so many people today.

The first three generations of Chandler men understood this message. They were adaptable and entrepreneurial.

Harrison Gray Otis started up the paper and ensured that his enterprise's growth would parallel the population growth of the region. Harry Chandler saw the influx coming too and made sure that he was at the center of the key public infrastructure and land development projects. Norman Chandler saw the burgeoning communications field, strengthened the paper, and expanded the corporation into the largest publishing entity in the nation.

In Otis Chandler, we see a mixed record, which the filmmaker seems unwilling to concede.

Otis was nimble and creative journalistically, dramatically improving the content of the paper, and successful in boosting the morale and esteem of the editorial and reporting staff. However, he was too workmanlike, good on the mechanics of producing a good paper, good at the short-term vision, but unable to discern what lay beyond the horizon.

Otis did not foresee, for example, the rise of the Internet and other multimedia platforms, powerful technological forces that would cut into the profitability of the Times and other newspapers nationwide.

Yet the film is enamored of Otis. The last half is largely focused on him. He is portrayed as the story's main protagonist with a white hat, a heroic figure shot full of arrows and felled by platoons of "bad" distant Chandler kin preoccupied by financial gain and petty grudges.