

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

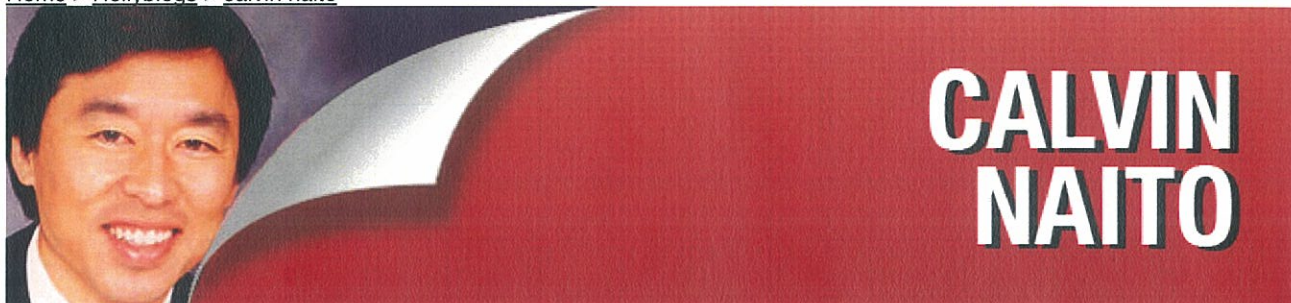
<http://www.thewrap.com/blog-entry/lesson-chandlers-adapt-quickly-change-or-lose-power-7882>

September 28, 2009, 12:04PM PDT

By: Calvin Naito

THE WRAP™
Version 2.0
Covering Hollywood

[Home](#) > [Hollyblogs](#) > [calvin naito](#)



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.

However, the great irony of the film is that although Otis was the Chandler who took the paper to its greatest journalistic heights, he was also the Chandler patriarch who ultimately allowed the family newspaper dynasty to end due to his own failings.

The first three prior generations of Chandler men were unshakably committed to family. They understood the importance of family control and mentored successors to ensure the family legacy. Otis was groomed by his father Norman and only succeeded while Norman was alive to serve as peacemaker and defend Otis against the other Chandlers.

Yet Otis refused to groom and appoint any of his children to succeed him, including one who seemed prescient in understanding the coming multimedia age. The interviews with his first wife Marilyn, mother of his five children, are the most revealing of his character, especially her comment that: "Every parent wants their child to be outstanding. But Otis didn't feel his children were as outstanding as he was. Otis didn't like competition from his children."

With his self-indulgent nature, passion for the past (as symbolized in his personal museum of cars and stuffed wild animals), limited business stamina and unwillingness to foster intra-family compromises, Otis -- more than any of the preceding Chandler heads -- divorced himself from the entirety of the Chandler family.

The effect was irrevocable. On the social and family politics front, Otis lacked the maturity, leadership skills and deep family love that his predecessors -- especially his father Norman -- so admirably possessed. He was too selfish and rigid. He did not adapt adequately to meet the critical demands of family patriarch of the Los Angeles Times.

Viewers should not accept the film's wistful closing about the end of a dynasty. Instead of buying into the mythology of the Chandlers, they should remember the lesson from the Chandler story. They should feel empowered.

Compared to the oligarchy of the past, Americans today live in a more dynamic, democratic, diverse, and free society. It is challenging, paradoxically, perhaps more so. But by staying vigilant and adapting to change, they -- as individuals and a community -- can increase their power and relevancy and collectively invent a more spectacular world.

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

Comment

October 01, 2009, 6:43PM

Tom Johnson Says

Peter Jones did a splendid job in researching, writing and producing this documentary. Based on 17 years inside Times Mirror, I know Jones was brutally honest about the Norman Chandler and Otis Chandler era. He was quite specific about the successes and failures of the Chandler publishers, using interviews, historical documents and videos. He included the anti-Otis Chandler family members, especially their harsh criticism of Otis. Otis wanted editorial and operational excellence at The Times. He provided his editors and business-side leaders with the financial resources and the independence to publish one of the finest newspapers in the nation. Otis also loved his family, especially those who shared his vision of excellence for the company. Almost all of us who worked with Otis during his years consider him a giant among media leaders of the 20th Century.
Tom Johnson
(Former Vice Chairman, Times Mirror; former publisher, Los Angeles Times)

Response to Comment

From: Calvin Naito [mailto:calvin@calvinnaito.com]

Sent: Thursday, October 01, 2009 10:31 PM

To: 'calvin@calvinnaito.com'

Subject: Ex-LA Times Publisher Tom Johnson Responds to TV Doc. Review of Chandler Film

Former Los Angeles Times Publisher Tom Johnson replied to the online posting of an essay on the TV documentary film, "Inventing L.A.: The Chandlers and Their Times." The essay is a blog item on a site called The Wrap. Mr. Johnson's online comment was sent on the evening of Thursday, October 1st, just days before the film is scheduled to premiere nationally on PBS on the evening of Monday, October 5th.

The essay was written by me, Calvin Naito, someone who saw the film in advance and expressed his opinions. I have no professional or financial ties to the film or its companion book.

Mr. Johnson's comments are interesting in what he directly addresses and sidesteps. He spends most of his time defending Otis Chandler, the man who hired him, for his excellent work as the last Chandler publisher. In my essay, I did not disagree with this commonly held view. For example, I explicitly wrote that "Otis was the Chandler who took the paper to its greatest journalistic heights." Unfortunately, Mr. Johnson does not forthrightly address the issues that led me to conclude that Otis "was also the Chandler patriarch who ultimately allowed the family dynasty to end." In his avoidance, Mr. Johnson seems to implicitly concede that my argument has merit.

But why not read the essay and Mr. Johnson's comments yourself and form your own views?

Here is the link to the posting on The Wrap:
<http://www.thewrap.com/blog/calvin-naito>

Sincerely,

Calvin Naito