

## Nine-Eleven and the Prix Italia

If you think about the world in numbers, you soon realise that some have a distinct and outstanding potency. For instance, the street between Fourth and Sixth in New York is Fifth Avenue. But it's not just a number. Its very name carries the resonance of the most famous shopping street in the world. A few blocks away, you can look across at the new skyscraper which replaced the World Trade Centre. That leads us to another set of numbers: Nine Eleven, synonymous with a horrific atrocity that shocked the world. It is there that the Prix Italia picked up the story.

It was September 10, 2001, and Carlo Sartori, the energetic Secretary General of the Prix Italia, had invited Walter Cronkite, doyen of the American television commentators, to address the Prix Italia and to receive an Hon Doctorate from Prof Sartori's university, the University of Rome. Dinner had been arranged at the Eden Hotel, in Rome, for a party which included Walter and his wife, Betsy, and Russ Kagan, the New York impresario and close friend of Carlo Sartori, who had arranged the visit, as well as Mrs Kagan and, on the Prix Italia side, Luciano Pinelli, the festival director and myself, as President, with my wife.



Walter Cronkite

The Americans had left New York almost immediately before the atrocity. Walter lived not far from the World Trade Centre. What had been intended as a welcoming occasion gave way to one single, sombre, all-consuming topic.

Next day, television camera crews and newspaper reporters besieged the great hall of the university, anxious to record a comment from one of the most distinguished commentators of his day. Walter was well-prepared. He had made history when it was he who told the American people, on television, of the death of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, shot during a motorcade in Dallas. Walter recalled that the only way he could end the announcement, in deep shock, was carefully to enunciate the time and the date, in a statement that was to register its place in history.

Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded President Kennedy, was later to make a remarkable comment on Walter Cronkite's calibre and influence. Walter had taken time off from his anchorman role at CBS to

make a documentary on the American involvement in Vietnam. President Johnson said the documentary had moved American opinion on the war. If the US government could not persuade Walter Cronkite of the justice of the war how, the President asked, could it persuade the American people?

Walter took to the podium, in Rome, to deliver his address before the conferment of the doctorate. He spoke of peace. Against the background of the worst tragedy in American history since Pearl Harbour, he spoke without hesitation on the need to place the event in the context of a world where American values had to overcome the impact of a brutal attack which had cost 3,000 lives.



World Trade Centre

The Prix Italia was centred in Bologna that year, with some elements taking place elsewhere nearby. It was my privilege to introduce and thank Walter Cronkite on more than one occasion, a daunting task at the best of times but, in the charged atmosphere following 9/11, testing indeed. Walter maintained his theme that American values, the essence of what a democratic nation ultimately stood for, rather than weight of arms, would overcome such dark forces that had launched the attack.

Fortune came to my aid. I remembered a film I had commissioned for a Channel Four series, in the United Kingdom, called 'Revelations', in which we had interviewed the Dalai Lama in Nepal about his response to what was taking place in terms of the Chinese absorption of Tibet. One phrase stood out, devastating in its simplicity. He had said: 'We must all learn to live together on this small planet. It's the only one we have'. It seemed to me, that this reached the essence of what Walter was saying.

The speeches went on. I thought of the medieval English poet, John Donne: 'No man is an island, complete in himself. If a clod falls from a cliff, Europe is the less. Send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee'. We all shared the loss of 9/11. It was toward the end of the sequence of speeches, that I stood at the side of the stage and found myself relying on Lincoln's First Inaugural, after the American civil war: 'We must appeal to the better angels of our senses'. Again, the wisdom of this simple statement echoed Walter Cronkite's appeal. As I used the phrase, I looked down at

Walter's wife, Betsy, who seemed only partly to have heard. 'He has called my husband an angel', she said. I never corrected her.

Soon after, Russ Kagan reminded us that it was shortly to be the Day of Atonement, a significant day in the Jewish calendar. He invited those, of whatever faith, who wished to acknowledge the sentiments of that day, to join him in prayer at the synagogue in Bologna. I felt it my duty to support him and became deeply moved by the ancient ceremony.

Walter, his wife, Betsy, and our good friend, Carlo Sartori are now no longer with us. But, each in their way, left their indelible mark on the history of the Prix Italia, a festival of which it is often said, has its home in Europe but belongs to the world: the world of New York, the world of Tibet, the world of medieval England and above all, our world of today, as we gather each year in Italy, a family that transcends our many differences in our common belief in the better qualities of mankind, in the programmes we are privileged to judge.

James Graham, Hon President.

Spring 2015