



# Major Garrett's Wild Ride

He has done it in the most unusual way. He is one of only a handful of broadcast journalists who has worked for left-leaning CNN as well as right-of-center Fox News. He has been a print journalist for the conservative Washington Times, a reporter for left-leaning U.S. News and World Report, and a columnist for the more centrist National Journal. His capacity to bounce back and forth between liberals and conservatives, between broadcast and print, between covering four presidents and writing four books, the most recent being "Mr. Trump's Wild Ride," is part of the mystery and measure of the man. Garrett just might be an anachronism, a holdover from a bye-gone era where journalists were celebrated for their objectivity, for letting the facts lead them to the story. Even on his podcast, *The Takeout*, which he hosts each week for CBS, he lets his audience draw their own conclusions from those facts. But if that era is waning, brought to a head by the internet which values opinions and intimacy and punditry, how has Garrett managed to keep his journalistic integrity intact? Ask him and he will say that it's less about left and right, Trump or Biden, print or broadcast, and more about survival.

"I rarely describe myself as a success as much as I describe myself as a survivor," he says. "I'm still in it. I still love it and I'm just riding the waves."

**HE STARED AT THE PHONE** on his desk, not wanting to make the call. It's summer 1984 and Garrett, a recent college graduate, is working his first reporting job,

the cop beat at the Amarillo Globe-News. A six-year-old boy, who had been riding his bicycle, was found dead, hit by a drunk driver. Garrett's editor insisted he phone the family who had seen the crumpled bicycle on the side of the road, and the ambulance's lights flashing as they returned home from shopping.

Garrett summoned the courage to call, and in a halting voice spoke to the mom. But rather than focus on the boy's death, he focused on his life. "Can you tell us about his interests, what made him happy?"

Months later, he met the woman at the Amarillo Police Department. She recognized his name. "I just want to let you know we clipped as many copies of that article as we could find in the newspaper," Garrett recalls her saying. "It's the only thing that gave our family any peace in that whole horrible situation because it told us that the community paused for a moment to find out who our son was."

Garrett recalls the lessons the article taught him about journalism. Treat your sources with dignity and compassion, because what might appear as a two-inch brief to you might be the biggest story of their lives to them. "That level of accountability can never change; not in your mind, not in your training, not in your application," says Garrett.

Much like other print journalists focused on building their careers, Garrett moved from smaller media markets to larger, gaining clips and writing awards in the process. From Amarillo, he was hired as a reporter for the Las Vegas Review-Journal and then the Houston Post. But

he seemed to enjoy his outsider status at each publication. "I have been in a lot of different newsrooms and have been as much an oddity as a member of the team."

He would make the first in a series of "odd" career moves in 1995. He left the Houston Post, and "what appeared to be a bright and solid journalistic future," he says, to become the congressional reporter for the Washington Times, a fiercely conservative newspaper that was losing money. "People I left behind in Houston told me with all the confidence in the world that the paper would collapse," he says, "and that I was going to a paper that would ruin me reputationally."

But that didn't happen.

The self-professed "odddity in the newsroom" garnered enough independent journalistic credibility in his seven years at the Washington Times to land a job as a senior editor at the left-of-center U.S. News and World Report, covering Congress and the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. "And my [colleagues] would say, 'What are you doing here? You were at that conservative hack newspaper. Why are you at this august credible news organization like U.S. News & World Report?'"

But Garrett was just getting started. In 2000, he jumped from print to broadcast, becoming the White House correspondent for left-leaning CNN, the first cable news station to provide 24-7 news coverage. His most vivid memory of his time with CNN was covering President George W. Bush in Sarasota, Florida on Sept. 11, 2001, and watching him navigate the tragedy after learning the country was under attack. But in April 2002, CNN fired Garrett, telling him they wanted to "move on," he says. "I often joke, everyone wants me until they hire me."

Right-leaning Fox News hired him that same year, scooping him up as its general assignments reporter as he faced the same kind of head-scratching criticism from his new colleagues. "I leave CNN for Fox and Fox is like, 'What are you doing here? You worked at CNN.'"

But Garrett was not without an answer. "I found that process of being in different newsrooms to be deeply engaging and enlivening," he says. "It's made me a far more informed and curious reporter to get all those different perspectives."

Garrett seemed to thrive during his seven years at Fox, becoming the network's chief White House Correspondent. His recipe for success was to remain tethered to his center-of-the-road journalism values even as Fox was building its conservative brand on the backs of hard-right anti-Obama pundits like Bill O'Reilly and Glen Beck.

Facing page: CBS News Chief Washington correspondent Major Garrett reports from The White House. Left: Major Garrett speaks with Joe Biden before the 2020 CBS News Democratic Primary Debate in Charleston, South Carolina on February 25.



STORY BY ELISE ADKINS • PHOTOS COURTESY OF CBS NEWS

## CBS NEWS CHIEF WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT REFLECTS ON HIS YEARS OF COVERING THE WHITE HOUSE

It's not like he'd never done this before. In fact, this was the third presidential candidate debate he had moderated, and CBS Washington correspondent Major Garrett had prepped for days. Hours of intense research and mock debates with network anchors, producers and reporters couldn't simulate the high stakes of the Democratic debate on Feb. 25, 2020, before 400 people in Charleston, South Carolina. Nor could any planning prepare the moderators for the brouhaha to come, nor the post-debate criticism from pundits about losing control of the candidates that night. But Garrett knew that it wouldn't be easy subduing a candidate who insisted upon talking.

"You will be criticized for exerting too much control and being the big hassling voice of the media trying to keep everyone in their sandbox," says Garrett. "Or you are the diffident wallflower who allows this explosion of conversation to just plaster itself all over the screen like some Jackson Pollock painting."

Right out of the gate, the candidates grew contentious, interrupting each other,

talking over each other, as if they were fighting for their political lives. Which was actually the case for Mike Bloomberg, Amy Klobuchar, Elizabeth Warren, and even Bernie Sanders. The aggressive discourse of the candidates kept the moderators at bay. Garrett watched the chaos unfold from the booth, hoping that they would focus on issues that the co-sponsor of the debate, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, viewed as significant to South Carolina's large constituency of African American voters—housing, rural health care, income disparity, racial injustice.

"Even when you think you paired that list down, time slips through your fingers like sand," says Garrett, "and you don't get to nearly as many questions as you think you can."

As the debate ended and the crowd filtered out of the auditorium, a few candidates, still desperate to get in a final word, remained. As did Garrett, who sat on a raised stool at the edge of the stage with other CBS journalists, swiveling to interview individual candidates in what looked like a pop-up spin room:

Senator Elizabeth Warren: Is the progressive lane wide enough to accommodate both you and Bernie Sanders?

Environmentalist Tom Steyer: Will you be in it for as long as Michael Bloomberg?

Mayor Pete Buttigieg: Do you agree that [Bernie Sanders is] unvetted, and that some of his positions, either rhetorically, or on his own record, are disqualifying?"

The candidates wanted to talk about President Trump, complaining about how bad he was for the country. But Garrett remained persistent, redirecting them to issues brought up in the debate, and how long they could survive in the crowded Democratic field. It was textbook Garrett, the kind of re-centering on the issues for which he has become known during his 35 years as a journalist. Garrett, 58, has done what many of today's journalists find impossible: carving a path for himself in the murky middle, living his career in neutral, hewing to a media ethic of even-handedness that at times seems downright archaic in this overheated, highly polarized world of partisanship.

The New York Times reported that controversial comments about President Barack Obama by Fox personalities had so created the “perception of Fox News as an oppositional party” that Fox news executives directed Garrett not to appear on “the channel’s most opinionated programs.”

To avoid the perception of bias, Garrett says did what he always has done: focusing on the facts, calling them the way he saw them, which was usually right down the middle. It must have worked. Obama White House Communications Director Anita Dunne told The New York Times that she considered Garrett “a fair reporter.”

Garrett maintains that he was “the least Fox reporter at Fox. I could get stories other Fox reporters couldn’t get. What I did mostly was cover Democrats.” In the 2008 presidential campaign, Garrett interviewed Barack Obama six times. “My dear friend Jake Tapper,” then working at ABC, only got three interviews. “That doesn’t make me better than Jake. That’s not my point,” he says. His point is that Obama respected him, and that respect resulted in greater access.

In 2010, Garrett made what could be interpreted as another “odd” career move: he resigned from Fox News and took a job at the National Journal. Some media outlets like The New York Times speculated his resignation had something to do with the stormy relationship between Fox News and the Obama administration. But Garrett would have none of it, claiming his tenure at Fox was the best job he ever had, and that he was accepting a position as congressional correspondent for the National Journal, “knowing I would someday return to my roots in print journalism.”

Still, he had grown frustrated by the world of cable news, at both CNN and Fox, where opinion-based punditry dominated reporting-based fact. “Certainly, at Fox News, I saw the formation of hours devoted to personalities or ideology squeezing out straight-up news.”

Garrett also noticed that many journalists, especially younger ones, were drawn to “edgier” news with “strong points-of-view.” Their audiences already believed that journalists weren’t objective so why not be transparent about the same biases everyone had. “Maybe that’s a place where we’re finding more commercial comfort and more audience comfort,” Garrett reasons. “But that’s not my place.”

Garrett found more comfort in print, telling a publication for the University of Missouri, his alma mater, “I recently gave up my D-List Celebrity status as a cable news reporter to do what I love to do most – report deeply and write with passion. It took me about 7 seconds to get over TV. Hairspray and face powder are now discretionary, not mandatory.”

Garrett joined a team of National Journal reporters who focused on Congress, writing for the centrist



Major Garrett records an episode of his CBS News podcast “The Takeout.”

publication’s website and weekly magazine. He also became a weekly columnist, but said he was bringing a reporter’s instincts to it. “Meaning, I won’t pontificate.”

A big piece of his identity was still tied up with being a print journalist and after 10 years of being on the “television treadmill,” he seemed eager to test his writing capabilities. “Could I go back and be a writer? Did I still have my fastball?”

He wrote some pieces of which he was proud, and says he got his life back in a way that “cable television tends to suck from you.” He had no intention of going back to broadcast journalism but after two years at the National Journal, CBS made him an offer he couldn’t refuse: Chief White House Correspondent.

“If you look at the roster of people have been Chief White House Correspondent for CBS News, it’s a pantheon of American television journalism,” Garrett says. “I still don’t think I belong. But they let me be a member of that list anyway.”

**AT CBS, GARRETT’S WORKDAYS WERE** built around the movements of the president within the residence of the White House. This was no easy task when Obama was president but when Trump took over—with his daily tweetstorms, his relentless activity and his unpredictable nature—the rhythmic intensity of the White House beat grew exponentially.

“We had a phrase that went around the press corps,” Garrett says. “What a long month last week was.”

For a-year-and-a-half, Garrett was working 18-hour days just to keep up. Despite covering three other

administrations, “this particular president was beyond anything I ever had to contend with or try to comprehend journalistically.” But Garrett’s hard work paid off and CBS promoted him to Chief Washington Correspondent, granting him a wider area of coverage. Yet, it was during this time that Garrett dedicated himself to carving out time to complete his fourth book, “Mr. Trump’s Wild Ride,” which chronicled the first 18 months of the Trump presidency from Garrett’s perspective.

That Garrett was able to squeeze out a book says as much about his determination as it does the writing process that he had for each of his four nonfiction books. “I would set a rule for myself,” he says. “I would do something devoted to the book for eight hours every day.” Those hours could be spent consecutively or dispersed throughout the day as long as they were dedicated to research, writing or editing. A deadline was essential. Because of his day job, he did not have the luxury of extended time that some writers do. “A deadline forces me to put words on paper.” Because he felt his rewriting skills were strong, the key for him was to “get it out and onto my fingertips.”

“I write and write, and then take a break for like 10 minutes, and write some more,” he says. In those 10 minutes, Garrett would clear his head, pace his apartment, moving from room to room. “The crazy man’s out for a walk,” he would tell his wife.

“Mr. Trump’s Wild Ride” was released in the fall of 2020. It documented what Garrett perceived would be the most significant moments in the Trump presidency that might have a lasting impact on generations to come, among them: the travel ban,



the nomination of Supreme Court Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, and the appointment of special counsel Robert Mueller.

But unlike some takes on Trump, which seemed bent on savaging the president, Garrett did what Garrett does best as a journalist: he played it right down the middle. Publisher’s Weekly captured that perspective in its review of the book. “The assessment of Trump manages the difficult task of being both hard-hitting and even-handed, as well as smartly entertaining.”

But the pride Garrett felt in writing his fourth book was no match for the joy he felt launching his own podcast, The Takeout, in 2017. Garrett had spent 16 months on the road covering the Trump campaign and he knew he wanted to do something different, something that challenged him creatively. His wife also encouraged him. “You want to create something else,” he recalls her telling him. “Figure out what that is and then tell the network that you need to do that.”

He figured out he wanted to host a podcast, and convinced CBS to sign off on it, even though podcasts were all the rage in Washington. “In Hollywood everyone’s either an actor or an actress or a screenwriter,” quips Garrett. “Well in DC, everyone has a podcast.”

But Garrett envisioned something different, something nonpartisan, meaning something that covered the ideological spectrum. He wanted it to be about the people who move to Washington with the best of political intentions to help better the country. “They have different points of view but they work really hard and they care about it.” The podcast would only work, Garrett figured, if it felt like a conversation, and what better place

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**- MAJOR GARRETT**

to have that conversation than a restaurant where guests could open up over a beer or a sandwich. He knew the “boring province of Sunday talk shows and the punditocracy was white dudes,” and he wanted to change that. He would book more women, more people of color, for a rich diversity of voices.

“Look, I’m not a revolutionary, he says. “I’m not a social activist of any kind, but I wanted to make a conscious effort since this was my thing to build from the start.”

And building it from the start was important to him. In all of Garrett’s years in journalism, he had never had full creative control. There was always an editor or a network executive or a publisher telling him what they wanted. But not so with

The Takeout. “Every guest is booked by me or my team. All the questions are mine. We have built this into what it is, without one iota—not one scintilla of editorial supervision from CBS.”

That’s not to say it was easy at first, finding guests for an unknown platform, building an audience for what was CBS’s first podcast. But after three years of hosting liberals and conservatives, women and men, Blacks and Hispanics at establishments with names like Purple Pig, Bistro Biz and District Taco, Garrett says The Takeout is “now on 65 radio stations in 15 of the top 25 markets.”

The format of the show is quintessentially Garrett, a testament to the way he has done journalism since his days as a rookie cop reporter in Amarillo—with balance, fairness, and integrity. It’s not surprising that he says this podcast gives him the kind of satisfaction he has never before known in the industry. And it’s why he opens every show the same way saying, “Welcome to the very best part of my broadcast week.”