
A TRIBUTE TO I. A. (BUD) LEWIS

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The Roper Center, like so many organizations and individuals in public opinion research, benefitted from Bud Lewis' wisdom and generosity. We asked William Schneider, who worked with Bud at the Los Angeles Times for many years, to share his memories of this remarkable leader in our profession.]

Bud Lewis was a gentleman pollster. He was in the business for knowledge, not for profit, and he gladly taught everything he knew to anyone who would listen. He had a connoisseur's temperament, savoring the well-turned phrase and the elegant algorithm as much as his famous dry martinis and perfectly grilled steaks.

Bud was also a polling adventurer. He did things no one else would do (an exit poll of the recent Nicaraguan election, for example) and asked questions no one else would ask (like this one to Soviet respondents: "How likely do you think it is that there will be a mass uprising against the government of the Soviet Union within the next five years?").

I met Bud Lewis the way a lot of people met him: I asked him for data. As director of the NBC News election unit (1966-76), he was incredibly generous with young academics. ("Here are the files. Copy anything you like. Then let's have lunch.") As director of the Los Angeles Times Poll (1978-90), he was amazingly responsive to requests for information from inside and outside the paper. ("How have views of the press changed, by sex and race, over the last twenty years? We can get that for you. Say, are you free for lunch?")

Bud was a great question-writer. When reporters and colleagues would come up with the most ill-defined and convoluted hypotheses, he would think for a minute and say, "Why don't we just ask it this way?" "Yes," the colleague would respond, "that's exactly what I meant."

Some of Bud's questions have become classics. In trying to explain Californians' support for Gov. Jerry Brown, he came up with this ant-versus-grasshopper query: "What do you think is more important in life: working hard and doing what is expected of you, or doing the things that give you personal satisfaction and pleasure?" With amazing consistency, pleasure-seekers were Brown voters.

Bud believed that if you want to find something out, ask. He asked questions no one else did: "Were you ever sexually abused or molested as a child?" "Do you consider yourself homosexual or bisexual?" "Have you ever had an abortion?" When he wanted to find out how poor people felt about poverty, he asked them. When he wanted to find out whether journalists had political biases, he asked them — and their readers.

While topical polls were Bud's bread and butter, in-depth polls were his specialty. With the Times' support, he did detailed and comprehensive polling on attitudes toward poverty, abortion, press bias, homosexuality, anti-Semitism and child abuse. His work continues to serve as benchmarks for researchers in those areas.

Best of all, Bud had a wonderful sense of humor about himself and his work. He started out as a consultant to the Times Poll, commuting from New York on a regular basis to supervise the paper's new polling operation. A rival California pollster referred to him as "a guy the Times flies in every now and then to sprinkle holy water on their data." When Bud finally moved to Los Angeles, his editor presented him with an officially sanctified bottle of Holy Water, which Bud displayed proudly on his desk.

On election nights at NBC News and the Los Angeles Times, Bud was — to all outward appearances — an island of calm and serenity amidst a sea of chaos. By maintaining his composure and civility in that most uncivilized of settings, he was immensely reassuring. Everything was under control, even if neither he nor anyone else had the vaguest idea what was going on.

Bud Lewis died on Saturday, August 18, but I suspect that most of us will be replenished by his memory on a somewhat different date, one mandated by the United States Constitution — the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

—William Schneider

A group of Bud Lewis's friends and colleagues are in the process of establishing a research fund in his memory. While details are still pending, those interested in participating should get in touch with Mary Klette, c/o NBC News, 4001 Nebraska Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20016, (202)885-4786.

