

Ayn Rand in America's Living Rooms: *The Tonight Show, 1967*

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New Ideal, journal of the Ayn Rand Institute
June 6, 2022
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"I'm chronically happy," said Ayn Rand to Johnny Carson.

It was December 13, 1967, and Rand had just sat down for her third interview with the popular late-night host. Her comment was a response to Carson's observation that other people sometimes get "emotionally unstrung" during the holiday season. "Is that a good way to be, chronically happy?" he asked. "I think so," Rand answered.

But the conversation didn't stop there. Carson asked what happiness meant to Rand. "To achieve those things which I want," she replied without hesitation. "First of all, to be creative. Second, to have my husband. . . . Creative work and love are the two top values. If you have that, everything else is unimportant."

It was only a minute of dialog, but in it Rand deftly transitioned from exchanging conversational pleasantries to summarizing important aspects of her ethical theory for a popular audience. In similar fashion, Rand made every minute count during her three 1967 visits to *The Tonight Show*, addressing an astounding range of difficult subjects in what still qualifies, half a century later, as a television tour de force. Garnering a strong audience response (mostly in the form of mailed letters in this pre-internet era), she made three guest appearances in the space of four months — a rare occurrence, especially for a public intellectual.

The Tonight Show: A late-night haven

Back in the 1960s — before cable TV, the internet, YouTube and streaming video platforms — most Americans had access to only three local television channels, each affiliated with a national network. And before the advent of home video recorders and other time-shifting technology, viewers had to plant themselves in front of the TV set at the exact time of broadcast and watch straight to the end. Thus was born the concept of "prime time" — the period

between dinner and bedtime when the greatest number of potential viewers could sit and watch.

Naturally the shows with broadest appeal were broadcast during prime time: variety shows, situation comedies, serial dramas, westerns, movies. But when could a viewer hope to find more intellectual fare, such as authors discussing their latest books? Such programming was rare. The best hope for an author seeking national publicity in 1967 was to land an appearance on NBC's *The Tonight Show*, in the 11:30 p.m. time slot, where Carson was attracting several million viewers nightly.¹

Then as now, the guest chair on *The Tonight Show* was typically occupied by popular actors, singers and comedians. But a sprinkling of authors and other non-entertainers (politicians, lawyers, clergymen) provided variety. In 1967 *The Tonight Show* hosted Margaret Mead, Gay Talese, Max Lerner and Gore Vidal, among other authors of lesser renown. But Ayn Rand was poised to overshadow them all, by virtue of her philosophical approach, her ability to comment concisely on complex topics, and her willingness to excite controversy over fundamental ideas.²

Ayn Rand: A public intellectual on the rise

Rand was at this time a prominent public figure who would have been known to *The Tonight Show*'s talent bookers. During the decade following publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, a best seller, in 1957, Rand had lectured to packed auditoriums and appeared in national magazines, on radio and on television. Her first national TV interview was with Mike Wallace in 1959. In 1960 and 1961, she appeared three times on NBC's *The Today Show* for interviews with host Dave Garroway, publicizing her first book of nonfiction, *For the New Intellectual*. In 1962 she was a panelist on *The Great Challenge*, a prime-time CBS-TV panel discussion hosted by Eric Sevareid. In 1964 she was the subject of a lengthy *Playboy* interview.

What probably brought Rand to the production staff's attention in 1967 was a promotional outreach for Rand's new book *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*.³ Published in November 1966, the hardback version was selling well, and an expanded paperback edition was in the works for November 1967. That book made Rand's controversial political views widely available for the first time in nonfiction form — not only her theoretical argument for laissez-faire capitalism but also her commentary on such hot topics as the war in Vietnam, the military draft and student protests.

By 1967 Johnny Carson had been hosting *The Tonight Show* for five years.⁴ He was well on the way to becoming an American icon in his own right, the “king of late night,” a congenial host who was welcomed into the nation’s living rooms and bedrooms on a nightly basis. The show itself was then television’s biggest moneymaker, and Carson had recently emerged from a contract dispute with NBC making more money and wielding more autonomy over the show’s production decisions.

Carson’s personality and interviewing style would mesh well with Rand’s high standards for media appearances. Because she advocated a systematic philosophy whose tenets were new, controversial and difficult to grasp at first hearing — and because she had been “burned” by unfair criticism from individuals who misunderstood and distorted her ideas — she typically insisted, in writing, upon strict ground rules for her television and radio interviews.⁵ For her *Tonight Show* appearances, however, all we know is what’s contained in an on-camera exchange near the end of Rand’s first interview:

Carson: When Miss Rand agreed to appear on this show she only asked one thing. She says, “You won’t attack me,” and I said “No, I wouldn’t do that,” because I don’t think it’s a good idea to invite a guest on the show and then take issue with their views or to bring somebody else on with opposing views and have them sit and yell at each other for half an hour. I’d much rather have you here and express your philosophy . . . I think it makes for a much easier show, and people get more information from it that way.

To these comments Rand responded: “Oh, of course. I couldn’t agree with you more.” The result of this shared approach to conducting television interviews was a dignified, thoughtful discussion in which Rand was allowed to state her views without interruption, attack or needless distractions.

Carson, however, was not a potted plant. Although many questions he posed to Rand were obviously planned in advance, as is typical for such shows, Carson also peppered the conversation with queries that seemed to stem from his own curiosity: Why does man seem to need religion? Wouldn’t Asia fall to communism if the U.S. were to abandon Vietnam? Doesn’t the United Nations represent the best hope for peace? Wouldn’t complete economic freedom lead to monopolies? What would happen to the poor under capitalism? Does Objectivism’s emphasis on reason leave no room for emotion in man’s life?

Rand’s three appearances on *The Tonight Show* featured none of the cacophonous verbal fireworks that have unfortunately become all too common on interview shows. There was only the calm, rational discussion of important ideas.⁶

Rand's *Tonight Show* debut: August 11, 1967

The Tonight Show at this time was a ninety-minute program that started at 11:30 p.m. in the eastern time zone on NBC-TV.⁷ Rand's first appearance there has been preserved on low-quality videotape (only audio survives from the other two appearances).⁸ She was the last guest of the evening. Carson introduced her as the author of *The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged* and her new book, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*.

Carson began by asking her to summarize her philosophy of Objectivism. Rand did so concisely, explaining in essentials that she stood for reason, rational self-interest, laissez-faire capitalism and individual rights. Then, to connect these broad abstractions to everyday life for her viewers, Rand nimbly pivoted to a musical performance from earlier in the show. Florence Henderson had sung "[The Impossible Dream](#)" from the Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha*, a song in which Don Quixote describes his lifelong quest for goals that are out of his reach.

Rand: If you want me to illustrate what [my philosophy] means, it means that very beautiful song which we just heard, which was sung magnificently — only in reverse. It means that man, if he chooses his ideals rationally, can and must achieve them, here on earth in reality — that there are no unreachable heights for man

In other words, I approve enormously of that which makes people like the song, but I don't approve of its content. I say man can be happy, can achieve the ideal here and on earth.

Carson then invited Rand to plunge into two of the most controversial topics in 1967 America: the Vietnam War and the military draft. President Johnson's escalation of that war, begun in 1963, was reaching its peak, and the American death toll for 1967 would reach 11,363 (more than all prior years of combat combined).⁹ As more and more young draftees came home in body bags, and with no victory in sight, Americans were struggling to understand the moral issues involved.

"I am against the war in Vietnam because it is a useless and senseless war, and it does not serve any national interest," Rand told Carson. And she objected to the military draft on moral and practical grounds. "No man has the right to demand the life of another," she said. "Therefore, neither has a group nor a nation nor a country." An all-volunteer army, she argued, was the only moral and practical method of defending the nation.¹⁰

Reaction across the country to Rand's appearance was strong. A Phoenix bookseller was interviewed about the effect on sales of *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*: "We'd had the book here for about a year," said Terttu Koso, manager of a Doubleday book store, "and there didn't seem to be much interest in it. Then, right after the show, we could have sold 100 copies of it if we had had them — and hard-cover, too, with nobody even asking about the price!"¹¹

In modern times, Rand's appearance would surely have "blown up on Twitter." But in the pre-internet 1960s, letters and phone calls were the methods by which viewers conveyed their opinions to broadcasters. Rand reported that she received an "incredible amount" of mail, "more than I've ever received on any one appearance." *The Tonight Show* received more than four hundred letters, and Carson invited her back.¹²

Rand's first encore: October 26, 1967

In her second interview, Rand continued to promote her book *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, responding to Carson's questions about one of its essays, "The Roots of War." Rand explained how statism — any system such as communism, fascism, Nazism or the welfare state that subordinates the individual to the state — leads to war. Addressing those who looked to the United Nations as the world's best hope for peace, Rand declared it a corrupt organization that should not exist. "Observe," she said, "it's supposed to be dedicated to peace, to protecting the rights of nations — and yet Russia, which is the worst offender against peace, the greatest violator of individual rights on the largest scale, is one of the charter members. Now, that really amounts to having a crime-fighting committee in a town with the gangsters as part of the committee." The audience applauded.

Following a commercial break — when a typical *Tonight Show* guest might be engaging in comedic banter or introducing a clip from his latest movie — Rand launched a sustained assault on Pope Paul VI's recent encyclical "On the Development of Peoples." The pope's attack on capitalism, Rand explained, stems from the morality of altruism and demands that the world's wealthy sacrifice their standard of living for the sake of others — "the happier, the more successful, the more productive we are, the more we should sacrifice."

Following this October appearance, Rand received 2,839 letters and 75 phone calls, as well as 303 new subscriptions to *The Objectivist*.¹³ The high volume of correspondence required Rand to compose a "Dear Friend" form letter in which she thanked people for their letters and, in gratitude, enclosed a free reprint

of her article “Requiem for Man,” a written analysis of the papal encyclical she had discussed with Carson.

According to Carson, “the mail response has been tremendous” following the October appearance. According to one report, Rand’s October appearance drew “a whopping 3,000” letters, “the greatest mail response of this year for ‘Tonight’ and one of the largest the show has pulled in its history.”¹⁴ Said one television columnist, explaining Carson’s invitation for a December appearance: “Heavy mail from viewers of the ‘Tonight Show’ brought novelist Ayn Rand back to the late evening NBC-TV program last week for her third appearance in five months.”¹⁵

Rand’s third appearance in four months: December 13, 1967

Rand’s third and final appearance on *The Tonight Show* came just twelve days before Christmas.¹⁶ Instead of addressing hot topics in politics and foreign policy, this episode centered on Rand’s perspective on literature, drama and movies.¹⁷ Rand lamented the decline of Romanticism — works of art that “project man’s highest potential” by presenting “things as they might be and ought to be.” In light fiction, however, Rand observed that Romanticism survives in such authors as Mickey Spillane, Donald Hamilton and Ian Fleming, and in movies like *Dr. No*, which display a command of plot structure and a sense of drama, and feature the conflict of good and evil.

When Carson asked Rand about modern works that show a “slice of life” or depict people as animalistic, she responded with her own view. “It isn’t the mindless, it isn’t the brutal, it isn’t the ugly in men that one should be concerned with,” Rand asserted. “It is man’s highest potential, above all his creative mind, his values.” Referring to a previous segment of the show that featured film of astronaut John Glenn in outer space, Rand asked indignantly: “How dare modern writers present man as futile, helpless, frustrated, unable to achieve anything . . . after seeing that? And yet that is the . . . predominant theme of modern literature, man’s helplessness, man’s impotence, man’s evil.”

The interview closed with Rand’s recollections of the children’s adventure story that inspired her decision, at the age of nine, to become a writer. This inspired a series of questions from Carson on children and education. “I don’t think a child should be required to do anything for which you cannot explain the value of it to him,” she said, adding that high schools should offer courses in logic.

A philosopher in America's living rooms

Taken together, Ayn Rand's three appearances on *The Tonight Show* generated about an hour of dialog.¹⁸ In that hour Rand addressed an astonishing range of issues, from basic principles of philosophy to reasoned opinions on current events and cultural trends to lighthearted banter. She stoked controversy and pulled no punches. Although Rand would go on in later years to give long-form interviews to Phil Donahue, Tom Snyder and others, the Johnny Carson interviews remain unsurpassed for sheer breadth of topics and controversy.

That Carson invited her back twice speaks well of his intellectual courage. Carson's audience was Middle America, and Rand's commentary challenged their conventional thinking on morality, religion and politics. In her first appearance, when her comments attracted some boos from the audience, Carson responded: "Which is to be expected. Anytime anybody has any views that don't go according to the norm, you're gonna have some antagonism. But that's why we talk about these things." Consider also that, of the three thousand letters Carson received after Rand's October appearance, it's likely that a good number came from viewers who chafed at Rand's philosophic views or were outraged by her sharp criticisms of (among others) the United Nations and Pope John Paul VI. Yet despite having no doubt angered some portion of his audience, Carson invited her back for a third visit, at Christmastime no less.¹⁹

In the Ayn Rand Archives is a page from an interview that Carson gave to *Playboy* magazine in December 1967. Rand's line-markings in the margin permit us to surmise that she responded favorably to Carson's independent attitude:

Carson: You're welcome to think whatever you want about me. But there's only one critic whose opinion I really value, in the final analysis: Johnny Carson.

I'm grateful to audiences for watching me and for enjoying what I do — but I'm not one of those who believe that a successful entertainer is *made* by the public, as is so often said. You become successful, the way I see it, only if you're good enough to deliver what the public enjoys. If you're not, you won't have any audience; so the performer really has more to do with his success than the public does. . . .

I like my work, and I hope you do, too — but if you don't, I really couldn't care less. Take me or leave me — but don't bug me. That's the way I am. That's me. That's it.

The Tonight Show was usually, as Carson described it during Rand's August appearance, "kind of a crazy entertainment show." But for three nights in 1967, it transcended that genre and demonstrated the power of television to transmit serious ideas to a popular audience.

[Accordion]

Tap here for a list of additional topics discussed.

August 11, 1967:

- The contrast between rational egoism and the conventional morality of self-sacrifice
- Whether children are by nature self-interested
- How the ethics of self-sacrifice are learned from others
- Rational self-interest as an achievement
- Rand's atheism and whether religion is a need of man
- Religion as filling the vacuum left by a lack of philosophy
- Young people's attitudes toward religion and reason
- The ethical importance of productive work
- The value of human relationships
- Why the interests of rational men don't clash
- Family as an optional value
- Confusion and unearned guilt among young people
- Reason as the arbiter of moral disagreements
- Why individuals would voluntarily defend their country without a draft
- Why Europe, not Vietnam, would be the first place to oppose communism's spread
- Why economic isolation would topple the communist countries
- Russia as a mystical culture
- How a consistently capitalist America could free the world by example
- Why capitalism cannot coexist with altruism
- Capitalism as the source of the longest peaceful era in history
- People who don't believe in God but are frightened by the concept of atheism

October 26, 1967:

- The necessity of renouncing the idea that any kind of good can be achieved by force
- "Peace" groups who claim to oppose war but condone dictatorships (the use of force against disarmed victims)

- Controlled economies as the aggressors in war
- Capitalism as the system for protecting individual rights against “criminals at home, aggressors abroad, or settling disputes among citizens”
- America as a mixed economy, drifting toward statism (of the fascist variety)
- The way out: freedom, individualism, full laissez-faire capitalism
- What statism is
- Why America should have no dealings with communist countries
- Why the United Nations should not exist
- How the UN sanctions aggression, as by demanding that Israel give back gains from defending itself in the Arab–Israeli war
- The desirability of a complete separation of state and economics, like the separation of church and state
- The fallacy that economic freedom would lead to monopolies
- How government intervention accounts for the evils attributed to free markets
- Charity as a marginal issue, not a moral virtue or a duty
- Sacrifice as a positive evil
- Why man should be guided by reason, not emotion
- The importance of unifying reason and emotions
- Why Rand would not run for political office

December 13, 1967:

- Dramas should concern themselves with man’s highest potential, his creative mind, values — not ugliness, mindlessness and brutality
- The spectacle of playwrights presenting man as helpless while Col. John Glenn is orbiting in space (Glenn was a guest on that night’s program)
- Rand’s career as proof that people respond to greatness in literature
- The descent of James Bond films (after *Dr. No*) into satire and self-mockery
- The first novel Rand remembers, and how it helped her see the potentiality of writing
- Rand’s decision at the age of nine to become a writer
- How children are being held back by the educational process
- The necessity of teaching children logic and reasoning

¹ Research has not uncovered a reliable source of ratings data for *The Tonight Show* from 1967. One knowledgeable reporter wrote that the show was drawing audiences averaging three to four million. (Cynthia Lowry, “King’ Johnny Carson Put on Spot by Las Vegas, Hollywood Shows,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 22, 1967, 82.) However, interviewer Alex Haley’s research for Carson’s December 1967 *Playboy* interview put the figure at ten million, making his show “the biggest moneymaker on television.”

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_The_Tonight_Show_Starring_Johnny_Carson_episodes_\(1967\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_The_Tonight_Show_Starring_Johnny_Carson_episodes_(1967))

³ In the August appearance, Carson introduced her as the author of that “new book” and displayed on screen a copy of the hardback. The first hardback printing was November 1966. A paperback was issued in November 1967.

⁴ NBC inaugurated *The Tonight Show* in 1954 with Steve Allen as host, followed by Jack Paar. Carson’s tenure began in 1962 and ended in 1992.

⁵ “My ground rules for TV talk shows are no editing, no quotations from my enemies, and I must be alone, not in a debate,” said Rand in 1973. “I don’t give free publicity to my enemies. You can disagree with me all you like, but it must be polite.” (Rex Reed, “Penthouse Legend: Objective Look at a Play by Ayn Rand,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 1973, L5.) Surviving correspondence in the Ayn Rand Archives evidences several sets of ground rules, which varied from appearance to appearance during the 1960s and 1970s. Typically, Rand insisted on a serious discussion of ideas, with any disagreement expressed politely and impersonally, not in a debate style. There would be no engaging in personalities, impolite or insulting remarks, or attacks on Rand or her philosophy, and no quotes from or references to her critics. She sought prior approval of the wording of her introduction, and she expected her segment to be broadcast in its entirety, without cuts or changes of any kind. There is no surviving correspondence to indicate what ground rules she communicated to Carson and his staff.

⁶ Rand’s cautious approach to televised interviews doubtless saved her from some potential disasters. For example, *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1970 invited Rand to be a guest. Cavett had replaced Joey Bishop just a few months earlier as host of ABC-TV’s late-night show, in an on-going attempt to challenge Johnny Carson’s high ratings in the 11:30 p.m. time slot. Rand responded to the invitation with a list of conditions (which included the one we know Carson had agreed to: no attacks on her) that the show refused to accept. In an interview many years later, Cavett described Rand as a “wretched writer” and recalled: “I was kind of sorry she wasn’t [on the show], because I was kind of laying for her.” Susie Madrak, “[Dick Cavett Shares His Take on Ayn Rand](#),” *crooksandliars.com*, January 2, 2015; Elon Green, “[Cavett on Ayn Rand’s Demands](#),” *elongreen.com*, June 6, 2014.

⁷ At this time in New York City, only four other stations were still broadcasting this late at night. Opposite *The Tonight Show* on August 11, 1967, were a 1954 movie (*Hell Below Zero* starring Alan Ladd), a 1949 movie (*The Heiress* starring Olivia de Havilland), a 1951 movie (*Secret Assignment*), and *The Joey Bishop Show* featuring comedian Tim Conway and jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. The ABC network had launched Joey Bishop’s show only four months earlier as a challenge to Carson’s hegemony in the late-night time slot. He was replaced in 1969 by Dick Cavett.

⁸ NBC has no recordings of Rand’s interviews. The existing video and audio were the product of private individuals recording off the air.

⁹ <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics> The death toll in 1968 would be the highest total for the entire war: 16,899.

¹⁰ In 1967 the Armed Forces Radio and Television Network (now the [American Forces Network](#)), a government agency, created a thirty-minute extract from the August 11 *Tonight Show* suitable for one side of a long-playing record, which was then distributed to military personnel overseas (presumably including South Vietnam). It is not known whether the edited version included Rand’s strident opposition to the Vietnam War and the military draft. https://www.worldcat.org/title/tonight-915-ru-20-8-nov-1967/oclc/49925605&referer=brief_results

¹¹ Don G. Campbell, “Output Outstrips Retailer’s Space,” *Arizona Republic*, August 24, 1967, 49.

¹² Adrian Slifka, “Ayn Rand Pulls TV Mail [portion of headline missing],” *Youngstown Vindicator*, December 19, 1967, Ayn Rand Papers, 006_04A_002_001.

¹³ Note dated December 5, 1967, from “Bee” [Barbara Weiss] to Ayn Rand, Ayn Rand Papers, 010_24x_006_001.

¹⁴ Slifka, “Ayn Rand”; see also Jerome Agel, “Speechwriter’s Frontstairs White House Book,” *New York Daily Column*, April 12, 1968, 16. NBC re-ran the August 11 episode on May 18, 1968.

¹⁵ Slifka, “Ayn Rand.”

¹⁶ Documents in the Ayn Rand Archives show that Rand was paid \$320 for her December appearance, and it seems probable that she received the same amount for her previous appearances. Standard AFTRA Engagement Contract — Network Television, December 13, 1967, Ayn Rand Papers, 131_12x_008_001.

¹⁷ In correspondence prior to this appearance, Rand informed the staff of her various writings on arts and literature and assured them that Carson could make the discussion “as theoretical or as specific as he wishes.”

¹⁸ The recordings of her appearances in August, October and December lasted approximately 27 minutes, 23 minutes and 14 minutes, respectively (excluding commercial breaks). The August interview ran longer than scheduled, “bumping” actor Buster Crabbe, who appeared a week later. Similarly, the October interview extended into the slot scheduled for jazz guitarist Tony Mottola.

¹⁹ In his December 1967 *Playboy* interview, Carson was asked if he allowed storms of criticism to affect his choice of material for the show. He responded: “You can’t afford to. The only time I pay attention to audience mail is when it contains something I find possible to use for the show’s benefit. You can’t let an audience run your show for you. If you do, soon you won’t have an audience.”