

**Her Meet the Press:**

If it's Sunday, it's *Her Meet the Press*. Her being Martha Rountree (1911-1988), the founder and the first and only female moderator since the 1947 TV debut broadcast of the longest running television program ever, seventy years ago.

Born in Gainesville, Florida, Rountree took a few journalism courses after high school at the University of South Carolina, and began her journalism career in print. She worked at newspapers such as the *Columbia (S.C.) Record* and the *Tampa Tribune* before moving to New York City where she and her sister briefly operated their own radio production company. In 1945 she created her first original program, *Leave It to the Girls*, for the Mutual Broadcasting System.

*LITTG* was a cross-section of notable female personalities gathered to discuss any number of timely and politically issues. It was *The View* of its day. Though the show's content eventually deviated from Rountree's original intent, it proved popular and ran for two years, eventually migrating to Mutual television where it ran another five.

Another media endeavor she created would have a larger impact and enjoy a long-lasting success. It was a roundtable-type show where four of America's top newspaper reporters would grill a prominent news figure. She said at the time, "I think it is important that the public should hear its elected officers speak out and take their stand in answer to direct questions without preparation or oratory. There is nothing so refreshing as unadorned conviction."

Her show began on Mutual radio on October 5, 1945 with Rountree as moderator. At the time, she was one of only two women in the nation then hosting their own public affairs program, the other was Eleanor Roosevelt.

In two short years on the radio airwaves, and after garnering a Peabody Award for broadcast excellence, her show debuted on NBC television, November 6, 1947, known simply as *Meet the Press*, with Rountree as moderator. At this time she partnered with Lawrence Spivak, then the publisher and editor of *The American Mercury* magazine, as her co-producer and business partner.

From the start the show generated almost as much news as it discussed. President John F. Kennedy once called *Meet the Press* the "fifty-first state," in recognition of its extraordinary influence and impact on news and politics of the era. The show hosted international as well as national news figures. Chinese, Korean, German, Soviet, Indian, French, Cuban, and British newsmakers found themselves on the *Meet the Press* dais, facing Rountree and three to five other panelist-interrogators.



Rountree an extremely amiable figure of the era was also an authoritative figure unafraid to interrupt forceful guests and panelists. Mrs. William Randolph Hearst once reportedly described her as "a diesel engine under a lace handkerchief." Her influence in shaping *Meet the Press* has been noted as the most interesting, tenacious, and compelling of the series' moderators--with the possible exception of Tim Russert from the modern era of *Meet the Press*.

From the start, women played a significant role in the program. The first female guest Elizabeth Bentley, a former Soviet spy, was interviewed on September 12, 1948. Proud of its history featuring women journalists and newsmakers, *Meet the Press* has interviewed First Ladies Eleanor Roosevelt, Nancy Reagan, Rosalynn Carter, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Laura Bush. Other notable women appearing as guests over the years include Madeleine Albright, Shirley Temple Black, Shuttle Commander Eileen Collins, Shirley Chisholm, Elizabeth Dole, Marian Wright Edelman, Geraldine Ferraro, Jane Fonda, Indira Gandhi, Tipper Gore, Anita Hill, Barbara Jordan, Caroline Kennedy, Nancy Pelosi, Janet Reno, Condoleezza Rice, Phyllis Schlafly, Gloria Steinem, and Maria Shriver.

Rountree's 1952 Peabody Award acceptance speech\* resonates still today. In it she speaks of the important relationship between the free press and democracy, and warns that suppression of the free press could happen in America if her free press is silenced.

This year 2017, after seventy years, if it's Sunday, it's *Her Meet the Press*.

Sources: <https://blogs.loc.gov/now-see-hear/2014/08/meet-martha-rountree/>  
<http://www.digitaldeliftp.com/DigitalDeliToo/dd2jb-Meet-The-Press.html>  
<http://www.today.com/id/3403008/ns/today/t/about-meet-press/#.WAZJiDKZPeQ>  
\*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdnW2wc1cBw>