

## Oration for Stephen Sackur

To be Held on Thursday 19 July 2018, 11am by Dr Trevor McCrisken

Vice-Chancellor

Our honorary graduand this morning is a renowned British journalist and presenter of HARDtalk, the flagship current affairs interview programme on the BBC News Channel and BBC World. I am delighted to introduce STEPHEN SACKUR.

Stephen began working for the BBC as a trainee in 1986. Four years later, he became a BBC Foreign Correspondent, and was dropped straight into action covering the Gulf War after Iraq had invaded Kuwait. From 1992 to 1997, he was Middle East Correspondent, based first in Cairo and then in Jerusalem. His globetrotting continued in 1997 when he moved to Washington as the BBC's Correspondent for five years. He then headed back across the Atlantic to Brussels where he was BBC European Correspondent until 2005.

In his first 20 years with the BBC, Stephen witnessed and reported on a huge range of seismic world events that straddled the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If it was happening, it seemed that Stephen was there! The fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany; the Velvet Revolution in

Czechoslovakia; the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin; the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal and the President's impeachment trial and acquittal; the 2000 US Presidential Elections that controversially brought George W. Bush to power, who Stephen then had the pleasure of interviewing; the expansion of the European Union from 15 to 25 countries; and the simultaneous terrorist bombing of four commuter trains in Madrid in 2004 that helped turn the result of the Spanish general election three days later.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Kent in 1991, I vividly recall Stephen's exclusive reporting for the BBC on the mass killing of Iraqi forces as they retreated up the Basra Road from Kuwait City, marking the end of the Gulf War; it remains, he says, a "pivotal experience" for him that had a human impact that he will never forget. It was a slaughter that made him question the purpose of warfare, the role of ethics in conflict, and what it was that western forces were actually fighting for. It was a report that also affected me deeply and contributed to my decision to eventually become an academic whose work focuses on US foreign policy and in particular the use of military force. Indeed, a few years after the events, my PhD research and first book featured analysis of the Gulf War and the decision by the US to halt the bombing and strafing of the Basra Road. "Back in Washington," I wrote in my book, "Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell worried that the television pictures [Stephen's television pictures] of some fifteen hundred burning and charred vehicles were

giving the impression that US forces were ‘engaged in slaughter for slaughter’s sake’,” so he went to President George Bush and convinced him to halt the attack. Stephen’s reporting has, therefore, had significant impact on world events from the very beginning of his career...and even inspired the younger me to become an academic!

Stephen returned to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and filed the first television reports on Iraq’s mass graves, containing the bodies of thousands of the regime’s victims including small children. Stephen has described this as the most distressing sight of his life.

Following his posting as correspondent to Brussels, Stephen took over as presenter of HARDtalk in 2005. This flagship programme presents serious, 25-minute face-to-face interviews with the people who shape our world. There are no props, no video clips, no dumbing down, and no subjects are off-limits. Guests have included presidents, prime ministers, dictators and cultural icons – some legendary, some infamous! Among Stephen’s favourites were former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, his several interviews with Israeli policy maker Shimon Peres, and an encounter he describes as “combative and memorable” with Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez. He also remembers fondly that interviewing Gwyneth Paltrow in the luxurious surroundings of Cannes was “more fun than it should have been”! The programme, with a format that has remained tried and tested over two decades, has an enormous following around

the world – the BBC estimates that it reaches 85 million viewers a week in nearly 200 countries, and another 66 million radio listeners. In 2010, it earned Stephen the International TV Personality of the Year Award by the Association of International Broadcasters.

So what is Stephen's secret? First of all, he does his homework: in his own words, he goes into each interview 'heavily armed', adding his own comprehensive knowledge and experience to the information in the 20 page dossier prepared by his researchers on each interviewee. He never shrinks from asking difficult questions: his aim, he says, is to ask people in power the questions that their own people and media would ask if they had the opportunity. He also gives his guests the opportunity to discuss subjects they may find difficult and, indeed, may never have discussed before. 'A good interview,' he says, 'starts with exhaustive research and ends with intense exchanges that can be a revelation.'

Over the years, Stephen Sackur has also made a host of documentaries for the BBC's *Panorama* programme and has contributed countless articles to the British press. He is a serious, inquiring journalist, a first-class observer, reporter and in-depth analyst of our times, a vital presence in these days of 'fake' news and instant comment on social media platforms. I am delighted to welcome him to Warwick today.

Vice-Chancellor, in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, STEPHEN SACKUR.