



**Mario López:** Recent polls have shown a fifth of Americans can't locate the US on a world map. Why do you think this is?

**Miss Carolina:** I personally believe that US Americans are unable to do so because some people out there in our nation don't have maps and I believe that our education like such as in South Africa and a the Iraq everywhere like such as and I believe that they should our education over here in the US should help the US or should help South Africa or should help the Iraq and the Asian countries so we can be able to build up our future.

# The End of World Peace?

BY AMANDA RANDONE

## From idealistic musings and jumbled word salads to carefully curated PR responses, the answers given onstage during beauty pageant interviews are changing with the times...

On a list of the top 20 pageant interview questions, according to contest coach and former Miss Montana, Dani Walker, there is no shortage of yours and yours: tell us about *your* favorite hobby, what are *your* future goals, which three words describe *you*... So, how is it that over the past few years, we know plenty about what the contestants get up to in their spare time, but nothing about where they stand on world peace?

The iconic *Miss Congeniality* scene springs to mind. A knockout Sandra Bullock, donning a strapless dress, a sash, and a forced smile, is asked what she thinks our society needs most. Forced to abandon her attempt to address the shortcomings of America's prison system when it is met with utter silence, Bullock's character, Gracie Hart pivots to the crowd-pleasing "...and world peace", earning herself a standing ovation.

It's been over a quarter-century since *Miss Congeniality* came out, and while little progress has been made on the peace front, the world is certainly not the same place it was 26 years ago, and neither is the pageant scene. No longer do judges want to hear the same manufactured responses that are too broad, too uninspired, too idealistic. They want fresh perspectives and real ideas. They want personality. They want a simple sentence that packs enough of a punch to spark conversations beyond the stage. Where jumping on the world peace wagon was a wise strategy at the turn of the Millennium, now it's about standing out from the crowd. Gracie Hart was, it seems, ahead of her time.

"You want to separate yourself from the competition, and you can't do that by going into the interview room and using the words that everyone else uses," explains Jimmy Langhoff, a pageant coach and mentor who has worked with five Miss USA crown holders in a row and the winner of Miss America 2024. And just as much as the approach to the interview has evolved, so has the overused vernacular among contestants, including, says Langhoff, "amazing, authentic, or authentic self, community, role model, empower, and passion, or passionate."

The ubiquity of this verbiage, along with the sample questions on Walker's list, suggest a shift from big-picture concepts asked during the interview portion to a focus on the contestants themselves. Rather than being probed about society's issues – which can't possibly be tackled in a matter of minutes – women are being encouraged to turn inwards and to get specific with their answers, revealing everything from community involvement to future goals; a way, perhaps, of meeting a highly online generation where they are in this climate of hyper-individualism. Or maybe, reframing questions to center a contestant's

personal experience is a response to the persistent cultural criticism of pageants as antifeminist, now giving participants more agency and opportunity to express themselves with, for lack of a better word, authenticity (with apologies to Langhoff).

Looking back on infamous interview moments from recent pageant history, however, it's not far-fetched to perceive the changing nature of the interview segment as a protective measure. These competitions, after all, no longer unfold exclusively on television. They also exist in a digital arena fueled by conflict-hungry algorithms, which means that even the slightest stumble, literally and figuratively, can subject a contestant to a tempest of harsh opinions, scrutiny, and mockery. The pressure to speak well, and without fault, is higher than ever. While Gracie Hart could course-correct in real time to win over her audience, today's pageant participants don't get a second chance. Their comments, and their errors, live on in perpetuity, thanks to the internet.

One of the most notable examples of this came from Miss Teen USA in 2007 when South Carolina's Caite Upton was asked why some Americans can't locate the US on a map. Her response was a maelstrom of nonsensical musings that traveled from South Africa to "the Iraq". Upton's answer set the internet alight with ridicule, and she instantly became a target for bullying that was so vitriolic she later told *New York Magazine* that she had contemplated taking her own life. A few years later, the internet was again abuzz with cruel commentary when, during the 2013 Miss USA Pageant, Utah's Marissa Powell struggled with a question about income inequality, ending her incoherent statement with "we need to see how to... create education better". Online reactions ranged from shock to satire to downright savagery.

As interview questions narrow in scope, it appears that there have been fewer viral mishaps and more room for contestants to speak from places of familiarity rather than with platitudes. Consider the response that helped Mexico's Fátima Bosch earn the 2025 Miss Universe crown. When asked how she would use her title to create a safe space for women around the world, Bosch said she would use her voice to empower and serve others, highlighting the need for women to speak up and be visible. Her newfound platform may exist within the confines of a patriarchal enterprise, but at least people are listening to what she has to say. Gracie Hart would be applauding from stage left.