

# BOOK REVIEWS

Some people make great sacrifices to kick the *Washington Post*. Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew got in their licks, and look what happened to them. Others have turned themselves into carping retromingent skunks in the commission of their anti-*Post* duties. Who knows what other calamities have been privately suffered in this patriotic cause.

Attacking the *Post* in Washington is like throwing a stone at a Soviet tank in Kabul: it won't damage the target, but it is symbolically significant. Denounce the *Post* in the morning and drink free that night. Indeed, the challenge for the professional *Post*-basher is to find new sins to denounce. Think up a new angle, and you'll never have another sober day.

Deborah Davis found a new angle, and, unlike conservative *Post* critics, she drew return fire. *Katharine the Great*, her 1979 biography of Katharine Graham, the *Post*'s owner, was so despised by Mrs. Graham and *Post* editor Ben Bradlee that they convinced Harcourt Brace Jovanovich to feed all 25,000 copies to the shredder—eight years before Ollie North made the appliance respectable. The book has recently been republished by National Press of Bethesda, Maryland.

At this point, conservative *Post*-bashers scratch their heads. What could she have said that they haven't? Following the KAL 007 shoot-down, they denounced the *Post*'s coverage with such fury that you'd have thought that Bradlee piloted the Soviet attack plane. He's been accused of publishing state secrets, giving aid and comfort to the enemy, and running a protection racket for the ghost of JFK. And as if there weren't enough junkies around already, one of his reporters went out and invented another one.

Davis, however, made a charge that conservatives would never think to make, even if they had the goods. She said that Bradlee, as a press attaché for the American embassy in Paris during the early 1950s, had bashed Commies for the CIA. She didn't accuse him of actually having been on the CIA payroll, but said only that he had produced various materials on the agency's behalf.

That got Bradlee steamed. On

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## KATHARINE THE GREAT: KATHARINE GRAHAM AND THE WASHINGTON POST

Deborah Davis/National Press (Bethesda, MD)/\$17.95

Dave Shiflett

December 1, 1979, he sent a sharp letter to Gene Stone, Davis's editor at Harcourt Brace:

Dear Mr. Stone:

You were quoted in Friday's *Wall Street Journal* as saying that Harcourt Brace Jovanovich "did everything we could to make it as accurate as possible." The "it" referred to the book you have recently published called "Katharine The Great."

That is one of those lies that should make it difficult for you to sleep at night. And it seems elementary to me that editors should not be liars.

Far from doing everything you could do to make the book as accurate as possible in matters that concerned me, you must have done nothing, absolutely nothing, for the book is riddled with reckless disregard of facts about me.

Anyone with casual acquaintance with me knows that Miss Davis is lying. Of course she did not even try to check anything with me. She boasts about not calling me in the same *Wall Street Journal* article.

This may seem of small consequence to you—the casual libeling of someone who has spent more than 30 years as a journalist. I am told I should sue you, although, as an editor, libel suits are an anathema to me.

What I can do, however, is to brand you

as completely irresponsible, to tell author friends to steer clear of you as though you had the plague, to brand Miss Davis as a fool, and to put your company in that special little group of publishers who don't give a shit for the truth.

I am enclosing a partial list of the inaccuracies that deal only with me . . . 39 factual errors in the 39 pages where my name appears.

Sincerely,  
Benjamin C. Bradlee

Many of the inaccuracies were trivial, some more important; but only the CIA accusation seemed important enough to draw the libel charge. Davis admitted that she was wrong on eight counts, failed to answer two charges, and held her ground on the rest—especially her contention that Bradlee had served the CIA.

Unpleasantries ensued. About a week after the Bradlee letter, a reporter from the *Post* called Stone asking if he'd been fired for working on the book. Sometime that December, the shredding began.

On January 10, 1980, Katharine Graham wrote a letter to William

Jovanovich, chairman and president of Harcourt Brace, thanking him for "looking into the inaccuracies in the book" and questioning Davis's mental state—and more. "Just for starters," she wrote, "the total professional credentials coming in were a very few freelance articles." Jovanovich responded on January 15, including everything in his letter save a proposal of marriage:

Dear Kay:

You are generous to write to me as you have. I cannot tell you how pained I am by the circumstances which have caused you, quite unnecessarily, distress and concern. If ever we should meet again, I would like to tell you some of my thoughts on what I have come to recognize as a kind of "editorial blackmail," in which persons say that if you reject a work or demand meticulous documentation you are repressing free expression and limiting the truth. The fact is that a publisher does select, does make choices, does take the financial and other risks of his own judgments. It has been a bitter lesson for me, but even so, your feelings in this matter are not to be compared with my own.

I send you good wishes,

Yours,  
Bill

P.S. Tell Donny, if you will, that Stephan (who was at Harvard and in Vietnam with him) is now a lawyer in California; and Peter, who came to your house that day of your birthday with me and my wife, is now himself a publisher, President of Peter Jovanovich & Christopher Morris, Inc. The generations follow fast, don't they?

Following this goodwill exchange, Bradlee asked Jovanovich to write a piece on "editorial blackmail" for the *Post*'s Outlook section.

Davis, meanwhile, was having her hide tanned. "After talking with most of the principals," wrote David Ignatius in the *Wall Street Journal*, "this reporter offers this judgment: the book and its tortured thesis are total rubbish." Ignatius's father had been president of the Washington Post Company, so he might know. (Ignatius is now at the paper himself.) Other disinterested parties were to join in later, including *Post* columnist Richard Cohen, who wrote in the *Nation* that *KTG* was a "fat, dumb book" whose destruction was not an act of violence against its author. "The victims here are Graham and Bradlee, not Davis," he said. Philip Nobile, formerly of *New York* magazine and now editor of *Penthouse Forum*, said Davis "is simply shameful, an embarrassment to her profession."

Who is this woman? As I grilled her



over lunch at the posh Hamburger Hamlet, Davis gave a clue by letting fly this beatitude: "If everyone on all sides were honest all the time there wouldn't be much need for wars." She says many other notable things, and it's hard not to be charmed by her, even though parts of her book read like they were written by the late Mikhail Suslov, especially her rants about class and money. She also seems to have an unhealthy attitude toward the CIA. When scolded on these points, she shrugs and smiles. "The book's an analysis from the left."

Other problems with *KTG* include unsourced allegations, drawing conclusions without facts, and antic observations: "The mysterious ways that men, particularly newsmen, cement their friendships, helped along by Scotch, cigarettes, and girlie pictures coming in over the wire, produced a vision that allowed them to mistake femininity and shyness for weakness." Many might write such a sentence, but few would allow someone to publish it. She also described a farm as being equipped with "shotguns for hunting deer and rifles for quail-shooting parties," which must have made things easy when it came time for cleaning the birds.

Davis points out that this was her first book, and that her editor was even younger than she. "I made mistakes," she says. "I wasn't as good a writer as I am now. But the usual practice is to correct mistakes, not shred the book." She also says her original manuscript contained footnotes, but her publisher wanted the book to be more of a page-turner and so dropped them. Even critics of the book have pointed out that Davis was not well served by Harcourt Brace—which ended up settling out of court for \$100,000 after she rolled out a breach of contract suit.

These shortcomings aside, the book reads well, especially if you like the Fawn Brodie school of writing. The portrait Davis draws of Mrs. Graham is not the work of an amateur, and a source at the *Post* says it hurt the famous publisher. That could be because Davis calls Mrs. Graham her husband's "stooge," for instance, and complains about her "bitchy" and "irrational" behavior. Davis also makes it obvious that she thinks Mrs. Graham was monstrous in her treatment of striking *Post* pressmen.

In the book it sometimes appears that Davis takes pleasure in Mrs. Graham's distress, which I said I thought was rotten of her. It was unclear at first if Davis was going to cry or come at me with her thumbnails. She makes clear that she does not want a charge of malice on her rap sheet. She responds that while writing the book she had dreams in which she sat around

and talked with members of the Graham family, and actually felt pretty close to them. She also identified with Mrs. Graham because both had somewhat distant relationships with their mothers. "I know what it's like to want approval from somebody and not get it," Davis says. She and Graham might even get along if they met, though Graham refused her requests for an interview. Who can say?

When National Press brought the book out May 30, it had been cleansed of many errors. Its republication represented a victory for Davis. "It took me a couple of years after the book was killed to regain my equilibrium," she says. "I thought I might republish in maybe twenty years. That's how demoralized I was. I knew it would be an uphill battle, and I didn't know if I had the strength to fight it."

Joel Joseph, president of the three-year-old company, offered \$25,000 for the book. After thinking it over a couple of months, Davis decided to bite. From an initial printing of 10,000, 8,000 have been sold, and there's another printing planned. Why'd Joseph do it? "I thought it was an important book and I thought killing it was absurd. There was nothing substantially inaccurate about it." →

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Since republication, Joseph says, he hasn't heard a peep out of Bradlee, even though Davis has included new information on the CIA allegations. The juiciest is a memo, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, written December 13, 1952 by a prosecutor in the Rosenberg case. The memo said Bradlee had called to say he'd just flown in from Paris and wanted "to look at the Rosenberg file in order to answer the Communist propaganda about the Rosenberg case in the Paris newspapers." It also said that Bradlee "further advised that he was sent here by Robert Thayer, who is the head of the CIA in Paris. . . . He stated that he was supposed to have been met by a representative of the CIA at the airport but missed connections. He has been trying to get in touch with Allen Dulles but has been unable to do so." (Dulles was deputy director of the agency at the time.)

This is far from an airtight case, of course. But if the *Post* were doing a story on, say, Pat Buchanan, and found a similar memo, it would surely use it. It's also possible that the memo was all wrong, and one wonders what the accused has to say about this latest assault. These things should be checked out, as Bradlee pointed out in his letter to Davis's editor in 1979. So I rang him up.

"Mr. Bradlee is not commenting," said a spokeswoman, "but if he were, he would say that it is all untrue." Bradlee did tell UPI that Thayer was CIA station chief in Paris when he was working in the embassy. He also said

he had not worked for or with the CIA, and that neither Thayer nor the CIA was involved in countering propaganda about the Rosenberg prosecution.

So what are we to think? Davis, for one thing, is a pretty tough number, and held up pretty well when the dragon cut loose. By republishing, she has overcome a strong challenge to her reputation at a critical point in her career. And even though her book might not get quoted in the Encyclopedia Britannica, she has succeeded in sinking a tooth through the legendary

hide of Ben Bradlee. Unless it turns out that the new evidence was faked, which no one has claimed, there's at least some reason to believe that Ben really was a 1950s Commie-basher for the CIA. That will cause many a conservative to tip his hat toward the *Post* building at 15th and L in downtown D.C. Then again, if it is true, Bradlee's assault on Deborah Davis represented the attempted infanticide of a young writer's career in order to save himself some "embarrassment." But that's probably a charge he wouldn't mind. □

## NIXON: THE EDUCATION OF A POLITICIAN, 1913-1962

Stephen E. Ambrose/Simon and Schuster/\$22.95

Alonzo L. Hamby

**W**hy did we hate him so?

It is a question that in retrospect many thoughtful people must ask themselves about Richard Nixon. However one feels about his presidency—and I confess to a mixed evaluation—it is undeniable that in sheer personal competence he far surpasses his successors. Had he not allowed himself to get caught up in the Watergate scandal, he surely would be remembered as one of the more talented and effective chief executives of this century. His foreign policies were far more subtle, intelligent, and flexible than his opposition's. When he became President, he had no choice but to extricate the United States from Vietnam; it is hard to imagine how anyone could have done it with less damage. His domestic policies—among them revenue-sharing and the aborted Family Assistance Plan—were at times bold and innovative. He brought to the presidency qualities central to the textbook conception of the office—a sense of policy direction, political realism, pragmatic opportunism, and a remarkable talent for political and diplomatic strategy.

Yet I could never bring myself to vote for him. (I would have done so in 1972 if I had thought there was any real prospect of a McGovern presidency; instead I indulged in the luxury of leaving the presidential portion of my ballot blank.) Like others in broad sympathy with many of his policies, I found myself so lacking in sympathy for the man that I cheered his resignation.

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tion in 1974 even as I was dismayed at the prospect of a successor obviously inferior in ability. Many among my family and acquaintances, quite a few of them considerably more conservative than I, felt the same way.

Why did so many Americans hate him? His newest and, to date, best biographer, Stephen Ambrose, poses the question a bit better than he answers it. Clearly, however, he thinks that Nixon's problems stemmed not from what he stood for but simply from the sort of man he was. In covering Nixon's career through his ill-fated race for governor of California in 1962, Ambrose gives us a picture of a man who uniquely polarized the electorate, had a way of appearing devious, and (the author hints) may have possessed some self-destructive impulses.

In the externals of his life, Nixon seems like someone who should have won the admiration of most Americans. He lived the American Dream; he was a poor (or at least near poor) boy who not only made good but achieved the highest office in the land. Is it possible, then, that for all the lip service we give the American Dream, Americans do not much like the qualities it instills in those who achieve it?

**N**o one can read of Nixon's childhood and his life as a young adult without feeling sympathetic. His mother was kind and concerned, but his father was difficult, temperamental, and quick to take a ruler or a razor strap to a disobedient child. (Ambrose does his best to soften Frank Nixon's image, but he is not very persuasive.) Two of his brothers died young, one of them unexpectedly, the other slowly

and tragically. (Inevitably, the one who survived became a personal and political liability, a kind of Republican Billy Carter.) The family survived only through ceaseless work.

Unable to afford Harvard, even with the aid of a full scholarship, Richard opted for Whittier College. He made his way through Duke Law School with a scholarship, money borrowed from his father, part-time jobs, and unremitting study; all the while, he lived in conditions that would horrify a case-hardened social worker today. Throughout his youth, he rarely had fun of any sort. American mythology tells us that this builds character; Nixon's story suggests that it can also pass a point of diminishing returns, where it grinds one down and closes one off from the world.

Ambrose does not explicitly analyze the development of Nixon's personality, but he finds in the young Nixon an insatiable thirst for achievement and recognition alongside a profound disregard for others. Among his many accomplishments, he was a star debater in high school and college; Ambrose suggests he well learned that debating, far from being a search for truth, is an exercise in persuasion and, often, in the manipulation of facts. He cites the comment of a Duke Law School acquaintance that Nixon was "not unmoral, just amoral." Many people respected him; no one, it seems, loved him. He was too detached, too tightly self-controlled, too single-minded. Above all, he appears early on to have come to the conclusion that life was a struggle in which Marquis of Queensberry Rules were irrelevant.

One detects also traces of self-doubt, possibly self-destructiveness, that the author does not probe. It seems certain that Nixon wanted to break out of his provincial environment, that, as he would say many years later, he listened to the sound of train whistles in the night. Yet there is evidence that young Nixon was equally frightened of the larger world. Did he really turn down a full scholarship to Harvard because of money problems? Four years later, he made it through Duke Law School under similar conditions, and his younger brother was able to attend a nearby private prep school. Was he really compelled to return to Whittier because he was "only third" in his class at Duke? It is true that Duke Law School's reputation was then relatively unproved; but Nixon did not try terribly hard to establish himself on the East Coast.

**T**wo things appear to have changed Nixon's life—his marriage and his military service. Ambrose's treatment of the marriage is intriguing, and satis-

## The Letters of BENJAMIN DISRAELI



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