

“An Especially Privileged Seat at the Parade”

By Max Holland

Ask the nation’s most celebrated newspaper editor the burning journalistic question of the day – whether or not to publish the Unabomber’s manifesto – and the response from Ben Bradlee is uncharacteristic avoidance: “The wisdom of the ages cries out for silence from Bradlee,” he says.

Now, Benjamin Crowninshield Bradlee is not your shy, retiring type, so the question must be an awkward one for him. It’s not because when he faced a similar situation, he decided differently. Rather, it’s because he has just written a memoir suggesting that newspapers should not turn over their pages to political extortionists.

The episode Bradlee recounts in *A Good Life: Newspapering and Other Adventures* (Simon & Schuster, 1995) occurred in 1976. Croatian terrorists had hijacked a TWA 727 en route from Chicago to New York, and were threatening to kill all passengers unless five newspapers printed a screed demanding Croatian independence from Yugoslavia. One of those papers was *The Washington Post*, which Bradlee had been more or less running since 1965.

“The idea of anyone . . . telling me that I had to run something in the paper that I didn’t want to run, much less that I had to run it on page one, was inconceivable to me.” Bradlee writes. “Yet I followed their instructions meek as a lamb. Once. I’m not sure I’d do it twice.”

Whatever private doubts Bradlee, who stepped down in 1991, nurses about the Unabomber cave-in, you will never find him publicly second-guessing his old publisher, Donald Graham, or his successor as executive editor, Leonard Downie. In the Bradlee firmament of values, where courage, grace and honesty are prized, no quality is held in higher esteem than loyalty.

And it was the *Post*, after all, that gave Bradlee the opportunity to preside over a powerful newspaper in the nation’s capital, a city where information is almost as prized as currency. The *Post* was also the vehicle that enabled Bradlee, during the 1972 Watergate scandal, to reach a pinnacle of professional recognition (and mass celebrity) that most editors can only dream about. Finally, it was the *Post* and Graham who stood behind Bradlee during his hour of mortification in 1981, when a Pulitzer Prize-winning front-page story turned out to be an utter hoax.

To the degree that Bradlee has enjoyed “an especially privileged seat at the parade,” as he puts it, he owes nearly everything to *The Washington Post* and its owner for the past

60 years, the Graham family. But they owe him, too. It's largely due to Bradlee's stewardship that the *Post* is considered one of the nation's best newspapers.

At 74, Bradlee is a trim and handsome man with an outsized personality and a voice as distinctive as Jason Robards, the actor who portrayed him in Hollywood's depiction of Watergate, *All the President's Men*.

Bradlee is the first to admit that he was "dealt a great hand – and played it OK." He grew up on Boston's Beacon Hill, albeit not its sunniest side, in a family that could trace its American lineage back some 300 years. There were governesses (Bradlee began speaking French at the age of 6), a proper prep school (St. Mark's) and finally Harvard (where 51 Bradlees had preceded him).

Not that there weren't deep ruts along the mostly privileged way. Bradlee suffered an attack of polio when he was 14, and one of his best friends died in the same epidemic. Because of the Depression, his father went from being an investment bank vice president to supervising the janitors at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, as the Bradlee family slid into genteel poverty until some wealthy relatives died.

His formative experience, Bradlee freely offers, was his generation's good war: World War II. He entered a boy and left an irreverent, profane man – a leader, in fact, having had a wonderful time in the war, something he was embarrassed to admit given all the horrors and sadness visited upon others.

Bradlee served on destroyers in the South Pacific, escorting aircraft carriers, bombarding island coastlines, and generally harassing Japanese forces. In the process he found something he liked to do: running shipboard combat information centers. These functioned as the destroyer's brain, monitoring and assessing data and redistributing it to officers on a need-to-know basis. During battle, the noise level was deafening as reports came in via radio, sonar, radar, lookouts and telephones all over the destroyer.

Bradlee thrived in this environment, for he liked making decisions and liked knowing that people were counting on him to do so. And he liked sizing up men and picking the best ones for the tasks at hand. He was, in his words, "able to inspire people below him, and to impress those above him."

If all this sounds mildly familiar, it's because newspapering is the closest thing Bradlee found in civilian life to running a CIC.

Bradlee's keen eye for sizing up other men also led to some genuine yet mutually useful friendships. While covering the municipal court in 1949, he decided to have lunch at a greasy spoon with a young lawyer who had just started his own criminal law practice.

The lawyer was Edward Bennett Williams, who went on to become Washington's preeminent defender of rogues, a fair number of interesting criminals, and counsel to Bradlee's *Post* in some tight spots.

But the friendship Bradlee was most famous for, of course, was the Georgetown foursome that included Bradlee, his then-wife Toni, and the junior senator from Massachusetts and his wife, Jack and Jackie Kennedy. Besides a fondness for salty language, shared attributes and experiences cemented the tie between them. Both were Harvard men and wartime Navy veterans, and both had survived life-threatening illnesses.

Beyond that, what made Bradlee and JFK friends was a sense that while life was to be contested and consumed, taking oneself too seriously was to be avoided. What made Bradlee and President John F. Kennedy great friends, McGeorge Bundy once observed, was “a shared coolness and irony and detachment.” That, and great disdain for Kennedy’s counterpart in the Republican party, an insecure but no less profane politician named Richard Nixon.

JFK did not live to see Bradlee’s *Post* chronicle the crumbling of Nixon’s Administration. Watergate has been so hashed over that Bradlee, in his memoir and in person, seems tired of it all. Yet it was one of journalism’s finest hours, for nothing about the scandal was inevitable. It is all too easy to imagine an altogether different outcome without a confident, decisive Ben Bradlee at the helm of the *Post*.

After the hubbub over his memoir quiets down, Bradlee plans to teach a course at Georgetown University, and is likely to produce another book on a subject close to his heart: newspapering and the unprecedented dilemmas involved in putting out a leading daily.

“Jesus, people hate newspapers,” he says. “They don’t understand our business and I hope I can fix that.”

Readers need to recognize, for example, that newspapers are not telling them The Truth on any given day, on any given story. The best that newspapers can hope to do every day is to deliver “a big, good bite of the truth,” he says. He also wants to explain why anonymous sources are used and, even better, how to figure them out.

Another issue he intends to explore is newspapers’ loss of control over their story selection. Not the Unabomber phenomenon, but the sleaze factor – what Bradlee calls the “attack” or “kerosene” shows that have become journalism’s lowest common denominator. These publications or TV shows now drive editorial decisions elsewhere.

“It’s all very well to decide not to run the Gennifer Flowers stories . . . [until] there’s Flowers flapping her wings and doing a big turkey trot” in other media, he says. “Then you can’t stick to your previous decision not to run it because the rest of the news on the subject won’t make any sense if you don’t.” And this ebbing control greatly worries him.

Many observers say *The Washington Post* is a less lively, less prescient, less focused, even less pertinent newspaper today than during Bradlee’s heyday. It is certainly a more

cautious newspaper. But Bradlee would no more share his appraisal publicly than second-guess the *Post's* decision, along with *The New York Times*, to publish the Unabomber's manifesto. Yet he undoubtedly takes pleasure in the *Post* being lumped together in the public mind with *The New York Times*.

For that's exactly what Bradlee worked so hard to achieve, and makes today, at least for a while, just like the old days.