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In Memoriam

Benjamin Bradlee

by Marlyn Rodriguez

Introduction

Benjamin “Ben” Crowinshield Bradlee, an icon in the journalistic world, died at the age of 93 on October 21, 2014. Bradlee was known for his work as executive editor for The Washington Post during the release of the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate scandal that led to President Robert Nixon’s resignation, the first presidential resignation in United States history. His efforts not only led to the resignation of Nixon, he inspired journalists to seek the truth.

In 1971, Bradlee published the Pentagon Papers, a confidential government report on the Vietnam War detailing how the American government “lied to the American public about the Vietnam War.” These lies included denying responsibility for bombing missions during the war and the actual amount of American deaths on the battlefield. The New York Times was the first to publish the Pentagon Papers, but stopped after being legally urged to withhold the information by the Justice Department due to

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3 Ibid.
the Nixon Administration’s claims that publishing them violated national security. After *The New York Times* (hereafter *Times*) stopped publishing the papers, Daniel Ellsberg, who was the source that provided the Pentagon Papers to the news organization, gave *The Washington Post* (hereafter *Post*) a copy of the papers.4

Once the papers were at grasp, Bradlee decided to publish the records after speaking with lawyers and learning that the publication of this information did not violate national security in any form, but instead presented the public with the truth. When addressing his motives for publishing the papers Bradlee wrote, “our duty is to publish news when it’s news.” 5

One of Bradlee’s goals as executive editor was for the *Post* and the *Times* to be equally respected by readers.6 The release of the Pentagon Papers elevated the respect and expectations for readers of both papers. An interesting fact is that, even though the *Times* received access to the papers first, it took them more than three months to put a story together while it took the *Post* only twelve hours once they got access to the papers.7 This had to do with the fact that the *Times* had access to them first and had more time to work on a story whereas the *Post* was on a time constraint to publish as soon as the *Times* stopped. As with the *Times*, the government attempted to prevent the *Post* from publishing the papers. The case went to the Supreme Court, where the *Times* and the *Post* were heard together, “in the same breath on the national stage, fighting together for journalistic freedom. Ben’s gamble has paid off.”8 The trial led to the verdict that the government could not restrain newspapers from publishing what they wanted because it would violate the first amendment which allows for the freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The ruling declared that instead of preventing a newspaper from publishing what they

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5 Himmelman, 43.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 47.

8 Ibid., 53.
wanted, the government has the potential to prosecute after the information has been printed if they find it violates the law.\footnote{Ibid.} The Pentagon Papers were important to the history of the Post because it established a relationship of trust and faith between the paper’s owner Katherine Graham and executive editor, Bradlee, the type of relationship necessary for the proper functioning of a newspaper as important as the Post.\footnote{“1986 Poynter Institute Interview with Ben Bradlee,” YouTube, accessed April 12, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP2KES3aNsI.}

Less than a year after the publishing of the Pentagon Papers the Watergate break-in occurred. The Watergate scandal was what eventually cost Nixon the presidential seat. Reporting on Watergate took place from 1972 to 1973, only one year after the release of the Pentagon Papers. The break-in occurred at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington D.C. The investigation into Watergate led to the conclusion that Nixon was part of a scheme that involved bugging the offices of political opponents and using government agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Internal Revenue Services (IRS), to harass activists groups and political figures.\footnote{Carroll Kilpatrick, “Nixon Resigns,” Washington Post. August 9, 1974, accessed April 12, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/watergate/articles/080974-3.htm.} When the Watergate break-in took place, Bradlee was in his country home in West Virginia and Howard Simmons, the managing editor, had to make executive decisions.\footnote{Himmelman, 47.} If this had not been the case, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward would not have been the two journalists reporting on Watergate, and the end result could have potentially been different.

While reporting on the case of the break-in, Woodward heard one of the burglars, James McCord, whisper to his arraignment officer that he worked for the CIA.\footnote{Ibid.} It was at that
point that Woodward and Bernstein’s investigation started, a partnership that would eventually lead to the downfall of President Nixon and his administration. Bernstein and Woodward received their information from an anonymous source they named “Deep Throat” who later revealed himself as FBI Associate Mark Felt. Bradlee claimed that Felt served more as a guide to Bernstein and Woodward rather than simply a distributor of inside information. After reporting on the Watergate incidents, Bradlee was the most important man in the nation with the exception of the President for orchestrating the publication of events that led to Nixon’s resignation. Bradlee felt that Watergate was “a great defining moment” in history and turned the Post from a good paper to a great one. The Post’s reporting on Watergate, however, did lack important details such as why or how Nixon’s attempts to gain inside information on his opponents started. Nixon was urged to resign after his misuse of government agencies was publicized. Bradlee admits to having seen change in the political forum after the publishing of the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. In an interview he explained that in 1974, after Watergate, he saw “a new breed of Congressman,” but eventually found that there was no change in the ethics of politicians. Instead there was an increased fear of getting caught. After these revelations, the relationship between politicians and reporters became one of strictly business. Bradlee was thankful to have been able to have an experience such as Watergate because an occurrence such as this does not happen often, he explained it as “a once in a lifetime experience.”

Bradlee was driven by the idea of freedom of speech, which helped motivate him during the publishing of the Pentagon

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14 Interview with Ben Bradlee, 1986 Poynter Institute.
16 Interview with Ben Bradlee, 1986 Poynter Institute.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Papers and the investigation of Watergate. Bradlee, was a Harvard College graduate, founded the New Hampshire Sunday News in 1946 and wrote for The Washington Post and Newsweek. Bradlee became the Washington bureau chief at Newsweek in 1957 and it was then that he met and became good friends with John and Jackie Kennedy. Bradlee was assigned to be deputy managing editor in 1965 and four months later became the managing editor for the Post. He began his position as executive editor for the Post in 1968 and during his twenty-three years as executive editor won eighteen Pulitzer Prizes. He felt that the location of The Washington Post was important because it was in the nation’s capital. Bradlee is also known for being one of President John F. Kennedy’s close friends, who he met first as a neighbor and was later in charge of covering Kennedy’s presidency. After Kennedy’s passing, Bradlee went to his cabin for twenty three days and wrote a book about his friendship with Kennedy titled Conversations with Kennedy. He retired at the age of 70 in 1991 but continued to work for the Post as their vice-president.

Bradlee explained that the biggest regret of his career was the Janet Cooke episode which included a story titled “Jimmy’s World,” about an eight year old heroin addict that gained national recognition and won a Pulitzer Prize but turned out to be fabricated. Cooke admitted to fabricating the story after she won the Pulitzer Prize and after being questioned by her editors. She was unable to show her editors where Jimmy lived or provide any further information on Jimmy and his family. Bradlee always

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Interview with Ben Bradlee.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
reminded his writers to tell the truth, even though he understood there were limited amounts of time and sources.\(^{26}\) Bradlee knew that trust between editor and reporter was necessary for a successful paper. It was because of this belief that he trusted Cooke, who was talented and ambitious, even though she had no sources or record of her claims.\(^{27}\) There was no way to prove it was false until she admitted to it, and as a result, the *Post* had to return the Pulitzer Prize. This occurrence hurt the credibility of the newspaper under Bradlee’s supervision and took the *Post* years to recover. Bradlee made sure there was nothing anyone knew about the Janet Cooke episode that was not first printed in the *Post*.\(^{28}\)

Throughout his career Bradlee received praise and backlash in equal measure. But there is no denying that he also made historic contributions that would change the meaning of not only investigative journalism, but journalism as a whole. Thanks to those contributions journalists became real contenders. Bradlee stepped down right when the rise of technology, including radio, television, and the internet, began to attract audiences, but refused to believe that those sources would take over print journalism. One of his major concerns, as he stepped away from the newsroom, was that reporters would be distracted from news and focus on other less important topics.\(^{29}\) Throughout his career, Bradlee maintained high hopes for journalists and wanted to have an influence on the public’s perception of journalists. Other than his professional contributions, Bradlee will be remembered for his excessive cursing, his short attention span, his brutal honestly, and his perseverance.\(^{30}\)

\(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
\(^{28}\) “Interview with Ben Bradlee.
\(^{29}\) Ibid.
\(^{30}\) Himmelman.
In Memoriam

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