

## Ben & Jack: Not a Love Story

Like Kennedy, Ben Bradlee was always interested in the newspaper and magazine business. After a short stint as a reporter in New Hampshire. He went to Washington to work for the *Washington Post* under then editor Phil Graham. He later went over to *Newsweek*. In the fifties he worked for the State Department in Paris. He returned to *Newsweek* to cover Kennedy's presidency. He had previously known him when he was a senator and they had lived in proximity to each other.

After the death of Phil Graham, Bradlee was asked by Kay Graham to take over the editorship of the *Post*, which he did in 1965. It was there where he gained great fame as the editor who oversaw the Woodward-Bernstein coverage of Watergate. Bradlee was also editor of the *Post* at the time of the Church investigation. It is interesting to note that, as Kate Olmsted details, the *Post* did as much as it could to deflect attention from the CIA and to the FBI during that probe. Bradlee ensured endorsement of Exner's story by sending his live-in girlfriend, Sally Quinn (a *Style* section reporter known for her breezy, gossipy writing) to interview her.

There is another notable point about Bradlee, Kennedy, and the Church Committee. Much has been made of Bradlee's book about his relationship with JFK, *Conversations With Kennedy*. Some in the journalistic community think it showed Bradlee in a compromised light, that is reporters should not be close to their subjects. This observation could only be made by someone who has not read the book closely, and has not done their homework on Bradlee.

In the book, Bradlee says that he had an oral agreement with the president not to publish anything until he was out of office for five years, which would mean he could publish in 1968. But the book was not published until 1975, the year of the Church Committee hearings.

Bradlee's introduction to the book is interesting. Very early (p. 12), he informs us that he believes there was more flash and dash to JFK's presidency than real substance. He also opines that Kennedy was the recipient of a good press while in office. I won't go into detail on the faults in this, but Don Gibson's book *Battling Wall Street* details how Henry Luce's media empire — to name just one —

had a dagger out for Kennedy. In his prefatory comments Bradlee explains that he will not shy away from Kennedy's use of profanity in this book and he again adds that the press protected Kennedy "as they protected all candidates, from his excesses of language and his sometimes outspokenly deprecatory characterizations of other politicians" (p. 18).

But there is a striking imbalance in Bradlee's candor in dialogue. It only applies to Kennedy. Never to Bradlee. Is Bradlee an altar boy? Not according to David Halberstam's *The Powers That Be*, in which the old sailor shows vigor and imagination in his colorful language and his characterizations of politicians, e.g. Lyndon Johnson. Most reporters leave this out for precisely that reason — everybody does it. So they don't want to be accused of singling any one person out. Bradlee chose to do the reverse and presented it as groundbreaking frankness.

This is symptomatic of the book's design. After seeing a James Bond film at the White House, Bradlee writes "Kennedy seemed to enjoy the cool and the sex and the brutality." Never mind that millions of others like that kind of genre, including Bradlee, who, Halberstam says, "liked straight and simple stories, crime stories, stories with a measure of sex appeal to them." Bradlee adds toward the end (p. 235) that before leaving one night, he and Jack "reminded about the night of the West Virginia primary, the dirty movie we had seen, whose plot the president seemed to recall remarkably well." (As if there was a plot to recall in the stag films of the fifties.)

This belittlement extends to matters of policy. In characterizing the Kennedys' reaction to the steel crisis of 1962, Bradlee has Bobby explain the tough measures he took against the powerful business executives with the puerile "They were mean to my brother." In a shocking statement, Bradlee writes that foreign affairs was not Kennedy's "particular field of expertise." But at the same time he deflates Kennedy, he inflates himself. Bradlee writes that he suggested to Kennedy that, as one of his first acts as president, he should fire CIA director Allen Dulles. Later, after Kennedy supposedly gave the go-ahead to a CIA-related student convention in the fascist dictatorship of the Dominican Republic, Bradlee inveighs against such things with: "I asked him about how he would

feel if the Soviet Union staged demonstrations in America ... to further their objectives...."

One has to admire both Bradlee's chutzpah and his disregard for the education of his readers. This is the same Bradlee who, on orders from Allen Dulles, examined the trial record of the Rosenberg case and prepared an Operations Memorandum for CIA propaganda distribution while he was in the State Department. This is the same man who, hearing from Richard Helms that *Newsweek* was for sale, carried a check from Phil Graham to Helm's grandfather as a down payment for the magazine. And it is the same man, who upon hearing that Oswald (the man who the *Post* tells us shot Bradlee's friend Kennedy) was meeting in Dallas on the eve of the assassination with CIA officer Dave Phillips, told a reporter to do all he could to knock down the story. To say the least, the devotion of Bradlee to his murdered "friend," was less than enduring.

Halberstam pinpoints Bradlee's character and deceptive nature: "Bradlee was an almost apolitical person ... he was interested in politics tactically, as he might be in a football game — who was ahead, who was behind, who was gaining." Halberstam adds that "Politics did not interest him much in the...sense that they reflected different values and attitudes." So it is not surprising that Bradlee's book exists in a political vacuum. Very few, if any, of the strongly ideological issues Kennedy was pushing, are mentioned e.g. civil rights. Again, this reveals more about Bradlee than it does Kennedy. For in explaining the change that took over the *Post* when Bradlee replaced Phil Graham, Halberstam writes: "He [Bradlee] disliked the liberal do-goodism of the paper, and he told his reporters and editors to take the liberal spin out of their stories." In fact, some of Graham's best reporters and editors, like Ben Bagdikian, left the paper when they could not fathom "what Bradlee really believed in."

Bradlee's deceptiveness about his conservatism and his CIA ties have, to echo Halberstam, been a tactical ploy, for Bradlee has been one of the shrewdest purveyors of the myth that the *Post* was a "liberal" newspaper. That myth has served Kay Graham and Bradlee (a Boston Brahmin whose family goes back five generations at Harvard) well. It has disguised to the public who they really are, and it has given uninformed rightwing yahoos an excuse to badger the media by pushing it to where both Bradlee and Graham really are and want to be. Bradlee's legacy continues. Today, the *Post* embraces Rush Limbaugh and denigrates a moderate columnist like Carl Rowan. ♦