

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Bradlee was a bold editor who helped us understand the world

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Scourge of the elite. Miguel Ariel Contreras Drake-McLaughlin, CC BY-SA

Author



John Jewell

Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

Ben Bradlee, the former editor of the Washington Post, who has died at the age of 93 was a crusading and courageous editor. He played a central role in exposing duplicity and deception at the highest levels of the US government, and embodied some of the quintessential values of journalism.

Perhaps the tribute made by Barack Obama is most fitting:

For Benjamin Bradlee, journalism was more than a profession – it was a public good vital to our democracy. A true newspaperman, he transformed the Washington Post into one of the country's finest newspapers and, with him at the helm, a growing army of reporters published the Pentagon Papers, exposed Watergate, and told stories that needed to be told – stories that helped us understand our world and one another a little bit better.

Exposure

It was with the 1971 publication of the **Pentagon Papers** that Bradlee first brought the Washington Post to the world's attention. Bradlee defied the federal government to oversee the publication of the papers, which were based on the US government's official documents relating to involvement in Vietnam since the end of WWII.

They were proof that successive administrations had misled the US public. More than this, by revealing that there had been military activity in Indo-China that had never been reported by the media, the Post highlighted the danger of journalists relying almost exclusively on government officials for information without questioning their national security sources. Plus ça change.

Most famously, of course, Bradlee was instrumental in bringing Woodward and Bernstein's investigation into the Watergate scandal to global prominence in 1974. It was their reporting that brought about the impeachment of Richard Nixon – in the words of Ben Bagdikian, “the single most spectacular act of serious journalism [of the 20th] century.”

In the immediate aftermath of Bradlee's death, Woodward and Bernstein issued this joint statement:

Ben was a true friend and genius leader in journalism ... He had the courage of an army. Ben had an intuitive understanding of the history of our profession, its formative impact on him and all of us. But he was utterly liberated from that. He was an original who charted his own course. We loved him deeply, and he will never be forgotten or replaced in our lives.

All this being the case, a man with such a long life and career can hardly be above criticism.

Humiliation

At the start of the 1980s, as a result of what many saw as the Washington Post's obsessive push for high-impact stories, the newspaper fell for a humiliating hoax in which a young journalist fabricated an interview with a fictional eight-year-old heroin addict.

When the story won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981 and the truth emerged, Bradlee and the Washington Post returned the prize and ordered an immediate inquiry into professional practices.

It is strange to think, too, that such a crusader as Bradlee would be an active member of the political classes of which he was supposedly the scourge. He went to Harvard, served in the Navy during WWII and worked for the CIA's European propaganda unit during the 1950s before fully embarking on his journalistic career. He was, by all accounts, a man of little political conviction.

To the general public, though, Bradlee was the archetypal editor, immortalised by Jason Robards's portrayal in “All the President's Men”. Hardnosed, loyal, fearless, this was a newspaperman who trusted no-one but his reporters.

For all his faults, he was exactly what we should want all our journalists to be.



Journalism

US politics

Richard Nixon