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DAVID REMNICK INTERVIEW
THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

DAVID REMNICK
Editor, *The New Yorker*
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Interviewed by: John Maggio
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Newspaperman
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ON SCREEN TEXT:
David Remnick
Editor, *The New Yorker*

Wanting to work at *The Washington Post*

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DAVID REMNICK:
Why did I wanna work at *The Washington Post*? It was the most hot shit newspaper on Earth. It-- you know, when I was graduating from college around 1980-81, *The New York Times* was still pretty stodgy and stolid. I-- I grew up on it. *The Washington Post* w-- had this combination of authority, but I don't know what else to call it, hot shit-ness. It was coming out of Watergate and much else. There was a certain kind of a panache it had, a certain-- even

though it was-- not-- let's not kid ourselves, part of the establishment in some way, it had an-- anti establishment edge, or at least it felt that way. And part of that was due to the, kind of-- journalistic glamor of the place and first and foremost, that was all about Ben Bradlee.

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DAVID REMNICK:

I wasn't there during this-- you know, this crazy period. I was a consumer. I was the guy going to the movies and reading the newspaper and following Watergate as a-- not even a te-- I was 13-years-old or something like that watching these-- mythic-- rumblings in the press. I was blown away by that movie. I can recite every line in the movie. I've seen it, I don't know-- some embarrassing number of times. So, you know, I was coming to it the way, you know, somebody would-- aspire to join-- a mythical baseball team having grown up on that team. But I didn't-- you know, again, it was pre-internet and to get a copy of *The Washington Post* in New Jersey where I was or-- or wherever, that-- that was a little bit of an achievement and it cost something. It wasn't so easy. So the way you were consuming *The Washington Post* if-- unless you were in its reading area, for most people, was on a level at least as much of myth as it was through reading it on a daily basis. You were hearing about it. You were seeing its effects. You were going to the movies. You were reading the books. And I did all of that.

What Ben Bradlee exemplified

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DAVID REMNICK:

One thing that Bradlee exemplified-- even just by hearing about him and watching him or reading about him in Woodward and Bernstein's books and all the rest was how much fun this activity was. That's the deep, dark, dirty secret. A lot of people think-- certainly politicians think in their minds that somehow most reporters are ideological in their motivations. And sometimes they are and certainly-- reporters are not completely immune to ideas-- or-- or morality. But the absolute fun of the activity-- even if it involves sitting outside the assistant D.A.'s office for six hours and then being turned away and missed flights and all the wasted time of reporting or dialing a phone -- there used to be such a thing - hour after hour just to get somebody f-- it-- it's-- it's adult work and yet it's not. And it's incredibly fun. And either you have a taste for this or you don't.

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DAVID REMNICK:

And Bradlee, in all his glamor, in all his wealth, and he radiated that too in-- in class terms, radiated also the fun of journalism. The adventure of it. He was never in any way-- it-- it makes me laugh when people describe him as in-- in any way-- ideological or politi-- as a-- or a political intellectual or something like that. That had nothing to do with Ben Bradlee. Nothing. First and foremost, he was completely energized by, titillated by, driven out of his seat by a story. You could see it in the way he published the newspaper. You could see it in his behavior in the newsroom. He loved gossip. That was a story, too.

First impressions of Ben Bradlee

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DAVID REMNICK:

The first time I ever laid eyes on this guy was as an intern at *The Washington Post*. So I got one of these coveted internships and-- and *The Washington Post* newsroom was s-- done in such a style that he was behind glass. And it's not as if Ben Bradlee was coming out to greet the interns at the door and give 'em a sandwich and-- and a nice, cool beverage. You saw him behind the glass the way you would see the woolly mammoth at the Museum of Natural History. He was on display. So there's this guy behind glass with his feet up on the desk doing *The New York Times* crossword puzzle with the puzzle grid cut out because that would be too easy with half glasses and the Turnbull and Asser shirt. You know, and he was in his later mannerist period by now. Right? He had done Watergate. He had done these big stories. You-- he was already-- I-- I guess he was in his 60's or getting there. So he was a really established figure. But it was-- you-- you were-- it was thrilling to see this thing the way you would see a great painting or panther behind—prowling behind the bars. It was—amazing.

Ben Bradlee's originality

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DAVID REMNICK:

Men might've wanted to be him, but they weren't going to be him. I-- I have to say I was at his funeral and there was a funeral program. And there was a photograph of him. I don't know when it was taken. It was taken by Annie Leibowitz and he was already in h-- he must have been in his late 70's and he's walking on a beach in the Hamptons somewhere probably and he's wearing a, kind of, dress shirt, but it's blowing open and he's preposterously tan and the hair's slicked back. It's just-- it-- unfair. It's just ridiculously

unfair. So the idea that you were gonna be that, in terms of your look, it's just not happening. But also I have to say as an editor, he lived in an entirely different world than I do. An entirely different world. So in the world that Ben Bradlee lived in before press criticism, and certainly before the Internet, before Twitter, before all of it, when he got a letter of complaint, like Al Neuharth would write him a bitchy letter from Gannett and Bradlee would just write back, you know, "Dear Al, fuck you," or some version thereof.

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DAVID REMNICK:

You can't do that anymore and probably shouldn't. Not because you're not brave. Not because you're not fearless as a journalist. Because they're different institutions and mechanisms that Ben preceded. So that way of being, that kind of swaggering, fuck you – there's certain ways you can and should do that in the most profound way. But in terms of the style of it—in the age of social media—the—your ability to step on a rake is so much faster and—more frequent that I—I don't think he could be quite the same personality that he was then.

Journalism as a profession

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DAVID REMNICK:

I got there in the early '80s. So you still had, to some degree, people that hadn't gone to fancy schools. People who had gone into journalism in a different spirit and a more, kind of, rough and ready way, you know the way that Harold Ross of *The New Yorker* did, when into the newspaper business in fact out-- out west, and then you had this-- wave of people going to fancy

schools and seeing journalism-- as a profession. Well, Bradlee straddled that for a reason. Because the glamor of journalism, the moral glamor of it, the notion of it as a profession happened at around his time. Watergate was part of it-- without a doubt or the Pentagon Papers. The fact that you could make a halfway decent living at it. Now you're not-- you're not gonna get rich, but you're gonna make a living at it, that wasn't the case earlier on in journalism. When I got to *The Washington Post*, I-- I-- I hooked on as a sportswriter and my salary was \$17,500. I was the happiest boy. And I was the first wave of people coming out of fancy schools that all went to investment banks. I didn't know what an investment bank was. And I didn't give a shit. This is what I wanted to do. And the idea that I was gonna do it in his newsroom, I mean, I've been really unlucky in life in some ways and preposterously lucky. That's on that side of the ledger.

Ben Bradlee's management style

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DAVID REMNICK:

If you stay in your office and you communicate by telephone call or sub ordinance or nowadays simply by email or text, whatever, that's one style of management. What Bradlee did, even though it-- first of all, he was visible behind glass. Really. Like-- like this kind of exemplar, this panther, this wildcat. Whatever. But he-- several times a day he'd walk around the newsroom and he barely, barely stopped and broke stride. And if you got an admiring comment or even got a joke, you were filled with happiness. I mean, it's-- embarrassing to recount it but it's true. And if you got the opposite or

you got the cold shoulder, you were meat. And you thought about it for the next three weeks or the next time something in there would happen.

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DAVID REMNICK:

But I learned this from him, that if you wander around the office, you're gonna hear things that you wouldn't ordinarily hear. You-- you're gonna hear the gossip. You're gonna hear how the Redskins are doing. You're gonna hear about how the Secretary of State is, you know, screwing around or whatever the hell it is. You're also gonna have a better sense of your people and you're gonna be closer to them and you're gonna hear things and it's gonna help you run the paper or the magazine, whatever it is you're running. If you don't do that, if you don't do that, you shut yourself off and that-- and that's where the trouble begins. And, you know, I came into *The Washington Post* newsroom right after the worst trouble Ben Bradlee ever had or *The Washington Post* ever had. It was the Janet Cook affair and it almost killed him. It almost killed the paper because not only was it a fake story, not only was it about race, they won the Pulitzer Prize for it.

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DAVID REMNICK:

It-- the-- the level of embarrassment was colossal. And the only thing they could do was the right thing. And thankfully that's what Bradlee did. He ordered Bill Green to do a 14,000 word investigation of this thing, which became the template for what you do when you screw up. And so even-- even when he did-- and he was partly responsible for it as—as were others and Ben—and as—as Bob Woodward, I'm sure, would be the first to admit was—was deeply—culpable. I mean, it's-- it-- making right decisions all the

time is impossible and this one was—a whopper. A disaster. It's what keeps you up at night.

Ben Bradlee's devotion to good storytelling

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DAVID REMNICK:

I have to say now...he was the editor of *The Washington Post*, not the editor of *The New Yorker*. So there's differences there too. He just was incapable of enduring boredom of any kind. Explanatory journalism was—it was vegetables to him. And anything about science or health or-- that stuff, he tolerated it and he, kind of, offloaded it to Howard Simons, his managing editor. Howard Simons was f—fantastically interested in—cultural stuff, but-- even more so science and health and all-- all that s—Ben was a political animal. He was into sports. He was into the kind of story that lands on the table. You pick it up and you go right to it. Not the thing that you put off and "I'll read that later." Somebody did something horrible, *The Post* found it out. You read about it immediately. Everybody's talking about it. He lived for that. That's what he loved.

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DAVID REMNICK:

Foreign—you know, I was in Moscow for four years during the h-- period of when it was the hottest story ever from early '88 to the fall of the Soviet Union. I think Ben appreciated that story. But I don't think it was-- it's where he lived. I don't think it's where he lived. He loved style, these kind of-- kind of, ballsy profiles that were-- what he did with style was to imitate and derive from the new journalism of the day, especially in *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*.

Esquire and *Rolling Stone* and try to make that part of the newspaper vocabulary, which it wasn't anywhere else. Not in any big way. That was a-- that was him. That was him. It was eventually Shelby Coffey. It was the-- the writers involved with that. He loved that. He was into that.

Lessons from Ben Bradlee

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DAVID REMNICK:

I think whether Ben admitted it or not, he learned from his own experience with John Kennedy. And I'll tell you a story about why and I c—I could see it and I'm sure there are many people who could tell a similar story. I was a young reporter now writing for the style section. I was probably no more than 26-years-old. And I'd been assigned to write a profile of Daniel Patrick Moynihan who was the great-- intellectual of the Senate. He was-- in force of nature. He's totally eccentric. A Harvard professor to his bones and his boots who also drank a tremendous amount. I mean, there's not a Jew alive that could sustain this and I don't know how anybody could. And yet, he wrote a book a year and he was an incredibly effective senator in his way. So I'm interviewing him. I'm interviewing his aides. I'm doing the thing that you're supposed to do. And I also start asking people around him about the drinking. And, of course, this instantly gets back to Moynihan and Moynihan immediately writes a letter to Ben Bradlee.

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DAVID REMNICK:

I am summoned to Bradlee's office. I had never been inside this office. I had only seen it through the glass. I get in there. I sit down in the chair like this

one and I'm looking at a desk and I'm looking at his feet, which are up on the desk, and I'm-- all I'm seeing are the soles of his feet. And somehow behind there leaning back on this oblique angle is Ben Bradlee and a voice like the Wizard of Oz emanating from behind the shoes. And I hear him say, "What's this shit about Moynihan?" Oh, God. I'm-- you know, I'm 26. I said, "Well, I'm doing this. I'm reporting this. I'm very--" he-- he-- and he says-- I'll-- I'll drop the-- the imitation. He says, "He's asking why you're asking about his drinking," and all this stuff. I said, "Well, you know, to be honest, it's a big part of his life. It's who he is. It seems to me completely legitimate." And then I give him this long explanation of the—the thoroughness of my reporting, which was a gigantic mistake. And then I end this recitation of my-- efforts by saying a sentence I really would like to grab back from history.

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DAVID REMNICK:

I said, "So Ben," I don't know where I got off calling him Ben. But, "Ben, don't worry." And I see from behind the shoes, suddenly his head raises up and he looks at me with utter contempt and he says, "Worry? Remnick. I don't fuckin' worry. Get out of here." Now the message there was obvious if you had two ears to hear it. The message was I heard you out. Now I can go tell Moynihan some—something. Go do your job. Report the story. And emboldened by that, I went to Moynihan and I said, "So, tell me about the drinking. You tell me." And he told me what he drank and it was heroic. And that was the end of the story and I printed it. I learned something from that. I carry that with me all the time. That's who I wanna be. Not by imitating him in-- in the style-- but that's who I wanna be with the writers here. I learned something.

Ben Bradlee's appeal

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DAVID REMNICK:

I'll never forget. Ben was in his late 80's and we were visiting friends at the beach, my wife and I, and Bradlee was wearing, late 80's, and he's in white pants and a blue and white striped shirt with the white collar, the whole thing, and the sleeves rolled up, I-- can I-- have I mentioned the-- in his late 80's, he's got these, kind of, weird Popeye like forearms. Tanned. And I look over to my wife and I realize that I am on hot-- I'm in hot marital waters here, that with the curl of a finger from Ben Bradlee, it's quite possible that my wife is going out the door after by-- by then 25 years of marriage. Happy marriage. But at that moment anything could've happened. I swear to God.

Ben Bradlee chose his words carefully

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DAVID REMNICK:

He was almost on a Russian level with profanity. And Russian profanity is so ornate that there are whole dictionaries and it's all based around three words, the male organ, the female organ, the verb, to fuck, and-- oh, and there's four. So, Bradlee was like a r-- a Russian artist with this. And unembarrassed about it. But it was a move. In other words, if it comes out of my mouth with that frequency, it just sounds tired and vulgar. But what's happening there, it's a-- it's a class thing. In other words, you-- you're-- you're-- you're, of course, made to know that his French is fluent. His parentage is what it is. He looks the way he does. He travels in the circles he does and then out of the mouth comes that. It-- it-- you can't just isolate the

profanity 'cause we all curse like sailors. Most of us do anyway. But that's just boring. For him, it was-- like a-- little bit-- it was-- it was like-- it-- it-- it was the-- it was the-- sweet and salty contrast in him. You know, he could c-- curse like a sailor or a stevedore and at the same time, he knew which fork to use at the French embassy. I would use the butter knife.

Ben Bradlee's inner life

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DAVID REMNICK:

Look, everybody has an inner life. I don't think Ben was especially troubled by his. At least not outwardly. I don't-- I don't wanna give him-- I don't-- again, I don't wanna make him into a cartoon and-- and-- and that's the danger of talking about Ben Bradlee is the cartooning of Ben Bradlee as the-- the, you know, cement mixer voice and the-- the women melting and the men doing this and Watergate. There's a-- there's a cartoon. And it's a cartoon worth drawing in some sense. But I know that he had an inner life. I just don't think he was at war with it, in the way some people are. I think he saw five psychiatrists in his life. I—I'd pity the psychiatrists. I—they might've had a good time and for 300 bucks an hour they-- they probably heard some good stories. But I don't know, and only Sally and maybe a couple other people could—could really know—to what extent—introspection, true introspection troubled him or got to him or stalled him.

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DAVID REMNICK:

And he had—look. He had troubles in his life. I mean, you—it—it-- it—you know, complicated family—relationships, God knows. He became ill.

He's—he's given to all the—all that happens to human beings no matter how glamorous, no matter how skilled, no matter how accomplished. But he was a big believer in, you know, pulling up your socks and moving on the next day. And that worked for him.

Earning Ben Bradlee's approval

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DAVID REMNICK:

Bradlee's approval came by inference a lot of the time. Don Graham did something that to me was exemplary and I try to follow. I not-- and I noticed it pretty quickly, is that, clearly, Don Graham at-- at a certain point in the week sat down with a bunch of notecards and wrote notes to—to—reporters and editors saying something nice about something they had written. And I still have those. They—they meant a lot. And that taught me something about-- about editing. About writers are needy reporters, are needy, and to get some sign of you're on the right track is essential. Bradlee didn't do this very often. He did it by inference. He did it by joking. Then once in a while there'd be some big gesture. But he was—he was both present in a, kind of, ferocious way, but there was a distance, too. Certainly by the time—my generation came around, there was-- you know, Ben would be in his late 90's now, right? So there's a 40-year difference. I was a kid. And he had seen a lot of kids come through the newsroom and that had it—it—its effect, too.

Ben Bradlee' friendship with JFK

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DAVID REMNICK:

Well, on the surface they had these similarities, like this, kind of, in-- in class terms by the way, Bradlee's would be higher than the Kennedys. Not in money terms necessarily, but in-- in pure class terms, the Bradlees were a notch up. Probably something not lost on the two of them. But I—I have to say, you know, that relationship didn't thrill me reading about it in the rearview mirror. It was more instructive than glamorous. I mean, I—it troubled me. Now it was way in the past. And I never fully understood how Ben Bradlee processed that, what he thought was a mistake, what wasn't. Yeah. He got some hot stories. He had this propinquity with this royal family. There was a sexiness to it because it was Kennedy and let's face it. If it had been a relationship with Nixon, it'd be quite something else in the public eye.

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DAVID REMNICK:

Let's—let's be frank. You know, I—I get criticized, I know, in certain quarters for being f-- quote unquote friendly to Barack Obama. But that has more to do—I—I'm not friends with Barack Obama by any stretch of the imagination. I—I—you know, on a lot of issues, I—am—am close to the-- those positions or I feel that the presidency in many r—for many reasons was—historical one, whether it has—whether it has to do with race or—otherwise. But I—in a million years f—that I—I would push away from. And maybe part of the—some small part of the reason that I would is—how instructive that Bradlee relationship was. Not that anybody's asking me to, you know—go on vacation with him. I—I just think there-- there needs to be some distance. I've got to a social occasion or two where I was just at some party. But—in the way that you'd go to a steak dinner maybe if you were lu—I learned something from that.

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DAVID REMNICK:

But that relationship was—in the same way that Walter Lippmann's relationships with people in power. They're—ultimately they come and bite you in the ass. They can compromise you. They can dull your judgment. They can do something. I—I—I—I'd be v—I'm very wary of it and should be. The first job of journalism, and this is essential, is to put pressure on power. Pressure on power. Investigative pressure. Reporting pressure. Intellectual pressure on the ideas being put out by power. All kinds of-- pressure that reporting and thinking bring to bear. That's journalism's first role. Not entertainment. Not selling copies. Not clicks. Pressure on power. And if a newspaper or a site that serious isn't doing that, you're not doing anything.

Journalistic integrity

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DAVID REMNICK:

This is one of the questions that you have, especially at a certain level at-- at a certain kind of publication because you are—you do certain interviews at a certain level and you're invited to things. But your-- friendship has nothing to do with it. There is no question that there is a seductive act that can come into play. And if you don't watch it, you're not only gonna undermine yourself, but you're gonna under—undermine the enterprise for which you work, which is the last thing you want. And then the problem is—is absolute distance ideal too? So there's this dance about access and distance and all the rest. You see this happening now with Trump. Right? I'm of the belief that this is not just a conservative that's replacing a liberal.

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DAVID REMNICK:

I have yet to be disabused of the notion that this is a uniquely—let's be gentle about it—underprepared—figure in American history that is carrying a lot of dangerous ideas into the White House and some dangerous people, too. This is not Mitt Romney coming into the White House. This is not John McCain getting elected. This is something entirely different. And yet, you wanna know about what's going on. And this White House has made it very clear they're gonna talk to who they're gonna talk to. And at the sa—but you s-- you can't debase yourself and yet at the same time, you wanna—you wanna know. You need to know, not only for banal competitive reasons but f-- to understand what's going into that head. Who's he listening to? What are the ideas? It's not necessarily all gonna come out in public pronouncements or even tweets.

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DAVID REMNICK:

So that dynamic of how you find out and what you do to get there—I totally appreciate the absolute outsider in journalism, whether it's Glenn Greenwald sitting in Brazil or—people that work thoroughly through d—documents or by the way, pe—all kinds of reporters who never go near Washington and tell us all about the country and the world and power is not their—their—subject. But somebody's gotta get inside there and figure things out.

Ben Bradlee's career timing

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DAVID REMNICK:

You're an editor in your time. And that has to do with ethos. And that has to do with race. It has to do with gender. It has to do with what you're gonna publish and what you don't. Things change. Look, Ben had nothing to say about the Internet. Look at technology. It just—just—just—I think he probably thanked God that didn't have to deal with the revolution in newspapers. He caught—he was a lucky guy in a lot of ways, not just in his—his marriage with—with Sally or his friends or his wealth or his—his own capabilities. He was lucky in his timing. Ben Bradlee was in this, kind of, post-war consumerist boom in which newspapers fed on this crazy amount of advertising.

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DAVID REMNICK:

He had money to work with. And he built something good so that advertisers wanted to be there. By the way, *The Washington Post* was a mediocre paper, even a bad paper before he took it over. Had some talent here and there speckled throughout the paper, but he built that paper with Katharine Graham. But he was ri—there were sociological, financial reasons why he could do it. And he didn't have to deal with what—some of his successors had to deal with, an absolute revolution. And that had financial effects that really—undermined the project. So he was lucky in that, too.

Ben Bradlee turned a good newspaper into a great newspaper

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DAVID REMNICK:

A newspaper's not a great newspaper when your biggest assets when you take over are sports columnist Shirley Povich or a—an undeniably great

cartoonist like Herb Block. He had no f—I think he had one foreign correspondent. One. That's a big world out there. And it wasn't even the best paper in Washington arguably, much less in the country. Ben ga—did or did not give up his left one and became the—I seriously doubt he gave up any and became the editor of *The Post*. The gap between *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* was crazy. *The New York Times* had 30 foreign correspondents. *The Washington Post* and this is amazing to—to even comprehend had one. One. Its biggest assets were a sports columnist named Shirley Povich, who year after year—would get a questionnaire from who's who in American women and they'd say, "Did gen—has gender held you back in your career?" And Shirley would answer, "No," and a cartoonist named Herb Block who was just, you know, a great star. But you-- that's not a great newspaper. And there were other people. There was some good editorial writers and all the rest.

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DAVID REMNICK:

Bradlee was starting from almost the ground floor and he was given almost carte blanche by Katharine Graham. It was an amazing team. But there were also other reasons why *The Washington Post* could become what it was. Money. You had this post-war consumer boom. Washington was starting to be not just a government town, but a wealthier town. So there were department stores and, you know, auto sales and all these things, people who bought ads that made the thing a-- booming enterprise. So by the time you got to its period of real greatness in the '70s, it was a cash cow. Ben never really had to deal with anything other than a burgeoning enterprise. There were blips. There were ups and downs. But he certainly never had to deal with, as

anything other than—an observer. Just an observer. The technological revolution, which completely blew up all the economic understandings of newspapers. That was left to somebody else. So he was lucky in a million different ways and that was one of them.

The Pentagon Papers

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DAVID REMNICK:

I don't think *The Washington Post*, early in the Vietnam War, was a standout. And on the ground, there was some good correspondence. The—the most notable of which was Ward Just. But I think where the history of Vietnam is concerned; the greatest performance of *The Washington Post* and the one that elevated *The Washington Post* itself is the Pentagon Papers. Its ability to join with *The New York Times* on that break, to take that risk, to put its reputation on the line for that story meant the world to—*The Washington Post*. And it's what made Watergate possible in—in a, kind of, editorial, spiritual sense. And that meant a lot. I don't think—I don't think that the overall—in the coverage of the war, either ideologically or in terms of seeing how the war was going back or was bad—early on that they were anywhere near the times and reporters like David Halberstam. That didn't happen until much later.

The partnership between Ben Bradlee and Kay Graham

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DAVID REMNICK:

You know, when I started my job, I—I'd never been an editor of anything except the *Pascack Valley Smoke Signal*, which is a high school newspaper,

which I wrote all the articles for and did at my kitchen table, which I think is inadequate preparation to edit *The New Yorker*. So I called Ben Bradlee and I said, "You have any advice for me?" And he said, "Have the right owner." 'Cause he knew that's what made him possible and what made *The Washington Post* possible. And I think the world of what Jeff Bezos is doing now, that he's pouring money into this and that they're experimenting and they're back in the game. This makes me very happy and it's good for *The New York Times*. It's good for America. It's good for American journalism. But Bradlee had the right owner at the time.

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DAVID REMNICK:

And—and he also had the times behind him. I mean the era behind him. That was also essential. So again, he-- and he knew how to—I don't think he played her in the sense that he tricked her. I think Katharine Graham was a woman who had been through a trauma. The world was not designed to give her a lot of confidence in the business world. She's dealing with all these men that belittled her or, kind of, condescended to her. She—he gave her confidence and she gave him permission. I think that's a big part of it. You know, so the first big story that I remember in an investigative sense that I had is a—at—at *The New Yorker* was Sy Hersh had some story. I can't even remember what it was.

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DAVID REMNICK:

So Sy Hersh had some big story that was accusing everybody of everything and the Russians were getting bribes from Saddam Hussein. This one and that. I can't remember all the details. I thought, "Oh, my God. What would Ben

Bradlee do in this situation?" So I called S.I. Newhouse on the phone and I explained the story to him, described the fact checking mechanisms, the legal mechanisms, and my confidence in the story. And there was a long pause at the end of the phone. And all he said was, "That sounds really interesting. I can't wait to read it." And I never called him again because he had said the right thing. What he was saying to me was, "You're in charge. You make the journalistic decisions. Thanks for the call. Thanks for the heads up. Off you go." That's all I needed to hear. I only needed to hear it once. So Bradlee's direction in me, make sure you have the right owner, was-- the right instruction and happily it was fulfilled.

Fact-checking is essential to good reporting

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DAVID REMNICK:

Well, you don't just trust a reporter. I'm sorry. You just—you-- you talk about sources. You check the facts. You beat up the story. That's what-- editing is not just, "Oh, this is too long. You're gonna make it shorter." Or, "This isn't clear. It's gotta be clearer." It's putting pressure on the story. It's saying, you know, again I—I'm afraid I know every line in that movie. You know, who's the source? How high? All those questions have to be asked. Reporters don't like this in the breach. If they're not used to it, they feel called out or questioned in an unattractive way. The good ones know what's going on. You know? Jane Mayer knows why I'm asking her these questions. You know, all—all kinds of terrific reporters at *The New Yorker* do and even though what we do is quite different from *The Washington Post* most—most ends, but it—in—in its essence, it's not. You're putting pressure on the piece. That's what editing and

fact checking and re-reporting is all about. So the—the notion that somehow you're a swashbuckling editor and you just say, "Let's run that baby," no.

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DAVID REMNICK:

That's—again, that's a cartoon. And that's not what Ben Bradlee did either. If you—you take the movie again, sometimes you take the story and it's not there yet and you're diminishing it and you're sticking it inside the paper, meaning you're not playing it up. He had judgment. It wasn't—again, this is the cartoon. The cartoon is—he's a man of all instincts and—impulse and swagger. Bullshit. He may not have been a literary intellectual. I wouldn't go to Ben Bradlee for political theorizing. But he was a really, really smart editor with judgment who, during the course of a very long career, had some mistakes. Join the club.

Watergate and the *Post*

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DAVID REMNICK:

I can't think of a story bigger than Watergate and more completely owned by one publication. That's what made it singular. It wasn't just the fact that it was this incredible scandal that kept spreading and spreading and spreading. You had a White House that—I mean, the president was running a criminal operation out the White House, essentially. Lots of people went to jail. I mean, it's an amazing, amazing thing. And *The Post* owned the story. Yeah. The *Times* got in on it. There were good stories in *The LA Times* and the—and *The New York Times* and elsewhere. CBS did some decent work. But *The Post* owned it. And the idea that at the center of it were two reporters who were

really young, I mean, God, I—you know, now—I'm 58 and the idea that two reporters who were, I don't know, bucking up against 30 maybe owned this story, it's enough to, like—it's thrilling and it's enough to give any editor a little agita. And they—and they didn't. They stuck with those guys. And—and they—they were equal to the task. It's an amazing, amazing event.

Confidential sources

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DAVID REMNICK:

I don't even know how to begin my admiration of what *The Post* did during Watergate. There was—there's one aspect that it's, kind of, strange to me. Ben didn't know who Deep Throat was until after the whole thing was finished, in my understanding. That's strange to me. I would insist on knowing. And I think Ben Bradlee later in his career probably would've insisted on knowing. Not only do I—I have to trust the reporters, but I have to know what I'm trusting. Now at *The New Yorker* we have a fact checking system and you have—overeducated 26-year-old—smart, young people calling back sources and all that and everybody that speaks to us understands that or they're made to understand that. So if *The New Yorker*, God willing, ever got a story like Watergate, we would have to be in the position of calling Mark Felt depending on what—what his positioning in the story was.

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DAVID REMNICK:

If he's just feeding information and leading toward other sources, that might be another thing. But the—but the fact of the matter is-- for a long period of time, Deep Throat was really important to that story. And the notion that they

went into meetings and they kept talking about Deep Throat and the only two people who knew who it was were Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and it remained that, I—again, I vow to no one in my unbelievable admiration of Bradlee and all the reporters in there, I—I think that detail is something—I'm not sure would've been the same if they'd done it ten years later.

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DAVID REMNICK:

It seems to me-- you know, I wanna know. I—I knew who the sources were for Abu Ghraib. Jane Mayer and I and other investigative reporters talk about these things and we trust each other. The notion, it's just trust the reporters. Trust, but verify, as Gorbachev and Reagan used to say. It's important to remember that Deep Throat was never cited. I—I don't think. Obviously Woodward would speak to this with—with much more authority and Carl. I don't think he was ever cited directly either as a blind quote or even an indirect way. But just as a matter of office discussion about confidence levels of stories to not know who that source was, it's—it's an-- certainly an interesting fact of history. I'm not sure at all concerned would wanna repeat that.

You have to be tough to be a journalist

00:42:37:00

DAVID REMNICK:

It's one thing for social media to attack you ideologically in one thing or another. And if you can't bear that, then, you know, do something else. But to have the Press Secretary of the president attack you personally for lying—you may be able to bear up—against it and you should. You need to be

at least that tough. But there's no question that advertisers are gonna get nervous. And sources are gonna get nervous. Not everybody's so tough. Not everybody's so brave. And so, again, we look back through all this, through—through history and it becomes cartoonish and swaggering and so on. I just—there—there's this, kind of, intestinal fortitude to—to bear up and to radiate that to the newsroom. That's the important thing. And not just gratuitously. To have the confidence in it, to bear up and to know you're right and to make sure you're right, because if you're just radiating confidence and your reporting is hallow, then you're just putting on a hallow act. That's nonsense.

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DAVID REMNICK:

But that's the job. And it's—that's why it's so wonderful to have had an example like this, because at moments when you are— self-doubt should always be part of your—at least it's a big part of my inner life journalistically and otherwise, because without self-doubt you're just a blithering idiot. But when it's time to stand up, to think back on that example, is a wonderful thing. Is a wonderful thing. It's not the only one. That's not the only way to do it. The only way to edit is not to have s—you know, that-- that hair and the shirt and the swagger and the-- that personality. That's—that's not repeatable. And when people tried to repeat it, it was comical. Comical. But the serious part of it—the—the confidence, the desire to tell the truth, the idealistic part of it as well as the performative part of it—that's an important thing to have had in your memory—when you're during your work.

Nixon's obsession with Ben Bradlee

00:45:09:00

DAVID REMNICK:

You do this long enough and you meet enough politicians, and you report, and you observe and you read history, finally these people are human beings. And Richard Nixon was the most fucked up, paranoid, brilliant, odd, awkward character that you could imagine in any novel, much less in real life. So the idea that he was obsessed on a class level, on an ideological level, on a political level with a figure like Ben Bradlee is no surprise. To hear it come out of his mouth on tapes is, you know—a gift to historians everywhere and—and probably novelists too.

Ben Bradlee was self-aware of his persona

00:46:02:00

DAVID REMNICK:

He not only was Ben Bradlee, he knew how to perform Ben Bradlee. You know, who Ben Bradlee was at his kitchen table over a tuna fish sandwich and a glass of milk, I don't know. I'm not even that interested. He knew how to come into that room, and I mean the newsroom, and perform Ben Bradlee. He knew how to get young reporters excited and inspired. He could deflate them in an instant. If that was his want, he h—ran—in his, you know, circle of people that were his peers, he—he energized them. He made the people around him better. It wasn't just that he was the boss. He was getting them to be better. I mean, he was like a great baseball manager. There—there are a number of ways to do it. You can be Casey Stengel like a—big, big, big personality. You can be Joe Torre who's this, kind of, quiet—both kinds somehow got this baseball team to play above their capacities at some time.

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DAVID REMNICK:

You put the right people on the field and get them to play the game at the highest level. That's the trick. He did it his way and he knew exactly what he was doing. I have no doubt in my mind. He—he knew all about the effect of the – the clothes, the voice, the French, the cursing. He was onto himself. I have to believe that.

Janet Cooke's fabricated reporting

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DAVID REMNICK:

I didn't walk into *The Washington Post* newsroom after Watergate and sense this feeling of cock of the walk celebration. As an intern, I walked into *The Washington Post* newsroom the summer following disaster, the Janet Cook affair. The—the—we have to give back a Pulitzer 'cause the entire story is completely and utterly faked, affair. And it was—you could feel it. It wasn't just the summer lull of Washington. It was the feeling widespread of an—of an institution of deflation—self-searching-- embarrassment and reconstitution. It d—mistakes don't get much bigger than that. And we're all gonna make them. This is the thing that you have to recognize if you're gonna be the editor of—of—of a—publication like this. Sooner or later—you can whistle through the graveyard as long as you want. Sooner or later mistakes are gonna happen.

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DAVID REMNICK:

Somebody's gonna screw up. You're gonna over—you we—while you're looking at this, this is gonna happen. The only way you're gonna avoid that is if you play a l-- low stakes game. If you decide—if you decide I don't wanna shoot for a big game and I wanna keep it just, you know, anodyne, you won't make any mistakes or the mistakes won't matter. That's not what *The Washington Post* was all about. It was a place where you wanted to show that you could get a big story. And Janet Cooke was a woman whose resume was full of holes, but she wasn't without talent. She wanted to be noticed. She wanted to get ahead. And it's not through ideology that you get ahead. It's not through big brains that you get ahead necessarily.

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DAVID REMNICK:

You get ahead because you get a great story. And the idea that this kid was a heroin addict and he was escaping all the means to help him and all the rest, despite what she was being told and the editors were being told by the city bureaucracy, which was highly suspect, meaning the city's government—and they were, you know, racial aspects to this. You had a Black reporter in this—in—in a newsroom that was colossally White still. It—it was a very painful episode. And the only saving grace about it and what rescued the situation was that Bradlee and company investigated themselves, put Bill Green into action, and did the right thing. That didn't erase all the pain, but it did a—it went a long way toward rescuing the integrity of the—of the place.

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DAVID REMNICK:

I don't know Janet Cooke. In some ways, I—I feel sorry for her. Disgrace is—is—is a horrific thing to live through, I would imagine, and—but she did

this thing and it—and it—and it—it won the Pulitzer. I think that's what made it so grand. You know, *The New York Times* magazine and around the same time wr—wrote some c—crazily invented story, you know, about Southeast Asia and the reporter never left his apartment and you're—these things unfortunately happen. But when they do happen, they can have ruinous consequences. I mean, look at Howell Raines. You know, Howell Raines wasn't adored in his newsroom. You know, he was a, kind of—you know, he did not rule by love, let's just say. He ruled more by frightening, by intimidation.

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DAVID REMNICK:

Although a brilliant journalist in many ways. And *The New York Times* in the brief period he was editor performed at an incredible level at 9/11 under Howell Raines. But this Jayson Blair thing undid it. Undid it. And—but Howell didn't have the friends in the newsroom that Ben did. You know, sometimes you'll see someone disgraced or have a terrible episode and they're able to come back from it because there's so much money in the bank on what they—did—what they've done in terms of accomplishment and also their relationships with other human beings. Sometimes people get undone and there's no one around 'em to speak up for them. It's a big difference.

No publication gets everything right

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DAVID REMNICK:

I know that Lynn Downey is not as sexy a figure as Ben Bradlee. Lynn Downey's a hell of a journalist. A hell of a journalist and *The Washington Post*

went on performing really well. So I—I—I—I will say no publication gets everything right. They don't—they are not quick to everything in an equal way. Sometimes because of a tip you get or if you're fast on a story of you're—somebody's missing the ball. Max Frankel was a terrific journalist in many ways. When it came to Watergate, he was too slow. He believed Henry Kissinger. But—and there are stories of Ben Bradlee I am absolutely sure wishes he had been better on. Me too. We've done anthologies at *The New Yorker* on various decades. I look back and I think to myself, "You're really in the '50s. Not—no profile of Elvis Presley? Seriously?" And things more serious. Where—where were we on this story and that story? It's very instructive to look at your past, but if journalism is anything, it's you're living in the constant present.

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DAVID REMNICK:

A constant present. And no publication gets everything. That's why we have lots of them. And that's why I'm worried about contemporary journalism is that a lot of newspapers, especially on—on the second tier in terms of second tier—second tiers—I don't mean it insultingly, but in terms of size. Who's gonna put the mayor in jail when the mayor misbehaves? Who's gonna crack down on the police chief if in St. Louis and Newark and Charleston and Tampa, newspapers are going like this and they're contracting to the point of being in—ineffective. I'm, in a sense, not that worried anymore about *The Washington Post*. The Grahams did an am—Don Graham did an astonishing thing. He gave up and sold something he loved. That must've been incredibly hard.

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DAVID REMNICK:

He loved that paper. He loved owning it. But he knew that he couldn't do anything other than contract at a certain point. And that was not just killing him, it was hurting *The Post*. And he couldn't do that anymore. And he found the right buyer. I mean, God willing, it goes on being the right buyer. God willing they figure it out and every other newspaper and publication follows their example and—and we all figure it out. Right now they're just pouring money into it. That's not gonna go on. That never goes on forever. But things have changed a lot and Ben didn't have to—look. Nobody's career and life goes on forever, so he didn't have to face that.

Ben Bradlee was a formidable editor

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DAVID REMNICK:

Ben Bradlee was a dangerous editor. And I mean that as the highest compliment. Occasionally it'd get him in trouble. He could be too hasty or rash or what-- whatever it might be. Any number of stories he may have wa—could've used another week in the garage. But he was willing to do the thing you're supposed to do. Put pressure on power. Come hell or high water. He did it in his spectacularly stylish way. But look at Marty Baron. Marty Baron doesn't resemble Ben Bradlee except in one way. He loves great stories. He lives for them. At *The Boston Globe*, he was amazing. He generated, more than anybody, *The Boston Globe's* work on—the abuse of kids by priests. It's amazing. That's dangerous work. And he's doing with David Fahrenthold and all these other people at *The Washington Post* now and God bless him. In no way does he resemble Ben.

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DAVID REMNICK:

I mean, Marty might have a nice shirt or two, but I-- you know, they—the—the similarities are—are—but they int—they intersect at one point and the more figures that we have like that, the better the Republic is gonna be, the better journalism is gonna be, better we're gonna be and we really need it now like never before.

The power of the press

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DAVID REMNICK:

Newspapers can do any number of things. They can entertain. They can tell you what the weather's gonna be. All kinds of information that's essential. What's happening on the school board and all those things. But in my mind, the primary reason why, the singular reason why they're essential, no matter what form they come out on, what—what screen or for or paper is that they hold the f—feet of power to the fire, that they—that they put pressure on power. Without that, they're nothing. That's what you have to do. And that even goes for magazines that have cartoons in them.

Learning from Ben Bradlee

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DAVID REMNICK:

I would be the biggest jackass on Earth to imitate Ben Bradlee. I would look like a fool. A fool in—in stylistic terms. It's just—you know, I'm a kid from North Jersey and I—I—you know, and that goes with me all my life. Right?

That's—that's—I am who I am. And—but the example of fearlessness, of energizing people, and you're failing all the time, by the way. All the time. But to have that example in the back of your mind is—it's not just useful. It's sustaining. It's inspiring. And I barely worked with him. He was, you know, I—I—for the—you know, the prime of my *Post* life as a reporter was in Moscow. But to have spent, you know, whatever it was, X years in the newsroom and see how it worked, even-- even at the second and third order you felt it.

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DAVID REMNICK:

I felt it as a sports reporter. I felt it as a feature writer, as a night police reporter, for God's sake. You felt it. And you—so you have to know that the person at the top of that organization is radiating out in certain ways that are—can be unbelievably positive or the—the other thing can happen where it can be, you know, a different kind of figure can be deadening, self-censoring—can limit people with real talent and energies. And—that's obviously the last thing I want.

How Ben Bradlee would have reported on Trump

00:59:21:00

DAVID REMNICK:

I think the most hilarious misconception about Katharine Graham and Ben Bradlee is that they were ideological. I—you know, they probably voted for more Democrats than Republicans, but I—Katharine Graham was pretty friendly to Nancy Reagan. I mean, these—these were figures of the establishment in a very serious way, and that has to be grappled with for—for

good and ill. It's—in my mind, it's hard to see how somebody who's the editor or the publisher of—of *The Washington Post* can avoid being in the establishment. It just is. But ideological, they weren't. They thought about these things. So I think that he would go at Donald Trump much the way Marty Baron is, as a story about a guy who—about a guy who— About a guy who lies colossally and daily, who doesn't quite seem to know what he wants to do as president, but whose—whose greatest impulse is to know his status at any given moment through social media.

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DAVID REMNICK:

That seems to be what energizes him most. And who has all kinds of conflicts of interest and strange people around him that bear investigating and reporting. And I think Marty Baron is a pretty great inheritor and has nothing to do, stylistically, with Ben Bradlee, and I think Marty would be the first to admit it. I mean, you see the performance of Marty Baron in that movie *Spotlight* and you see Jason Robards doing Ben. Those are pretty good—pretty good imitations. Pretty good performances. Damn good. They're not on the same universe. But they're joined in a certain way that is—to me, uplifting.

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