

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

RICHARD COHEN INTERVIEW
THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

RICHARD COHEN
Columnist, *The Washington Post*
June 05, 2017

Interviewed by: John Maggio

Total Running Time: 1 hour, 6 minutes and 9 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Richard Cohen

Columnist, *The Washington Post*

First impressions of Ben Bradlee

00:00:12:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I knew nothing about him. I had come down to *The Washington Post* from the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism and I was applying for a job and he was then the managing editor, and he interviewed me and I was struck by him. I never saw anybody like that in my entire life. First of all, he had the straightest hair I had ever seen. And he had this way of talking where he used the word, quite, a lot. We're quite pleased with this, we're quite this. And he

had a kind of accent and a way about him which was striking. He was very personable, very charismatic. And I thought he was an alien. Nobody in my whole family, nobody in my entire postal zone looked like Ben Bradlee or talked like him.

Ben Bradlee's natural instincts and luck

00:01:00:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I watched Ben over the years, it wasn't just with me, but later on he would look at people as they were hired. He had a veto, obviously, because he was the executive editor. But I even remember him saying, because I was standing at the desk where he talked about a particular applicant and he said, "You guys want him..." He was talking to subsidiary editors, "You guys want him, you guys can have him, but he's not going to work out." And guess what, six months later he was gone. He did not work out. He did everything with his gut, he had a great gut. His instincts were not 100% perfect, but pretty close. He was imperfect enough to make him interesting. You know, he was born with it. He had this gut... First of all, he loved being Ben Bradlee. He enjoyed being Ben Bradlee almost as much as I enjoyed being with Ben Bradlee. And that was a lot. And he knew the effect he had on people.

00:02:00:00

RICHARD COHEN:

He enjoyed it. He reveled in it. And his gut was good. He led this charmed life. He knew he was lucky. And he played his luck a lot. You just know, I guess, if you're lucky, that you're lucky. And he was lucky enough to have what he

called a good war. He was lucky enough to go to the finest private schools in America and not have it ruin him. He was lucky enough to go to Paris in the '50s where you could rent a château for \$1.25 a week. He was lucky enough to be a foreign correspondent. He was lucky enough to go to *Newsweek* when it was a building, unorthodox, fun place to work. It wasn't stuffy. It was the rebel of the news magazines. And then he was lucky enough to get to *The Washington Post* and to be hired instantly, first as managing editor, but really as the editor and become the editor. And he was really lucky as he would always concede to have the best boss imaginable, Katharine Graham. She backed him almost 100% all the time. And she signed the checks.

Ben Bradlee's commitment to the truth

00:03:14:00

RICHARD COHEN:

He didn't like liars, he didn't like phoniness of any kind. He used to refer to some people as a \$3 bill. He just didn't like pretension. He didn't like people playing and acting. He didn't like people trying to fool him. He didn't like people trying to cheat him. And he just wouldn't put up with it. And lying to him became, I would say, almost an obsession after a while. The lying that involved the Vietnam War, the lying that involved that was revealed in the Pentagon Papers, the lying that came out in Watergate, the incessant lying of the government, our government, our government lying to us as the people, not to the press. I mean, we didn't like being lied to, but we had ways of handling it. But to the people, it just outraged him. Ben was really almost totally a non-partisan person. I never—It took me years to figure out what his

politics was. But what he believed in was fairness. He believed vehemently and religiously in fairness. And that was his code.

Ben Bradlee's battle with polio

00:04:19:00

RICHARD COHEN:

He talked about polio a little bit, I don't want to belittle it, as if he went to summer camp. It was that kind of thing. He just passed through it and he came out of it with a little statuesque, something like that. But he used to say, for instance, that he had this chest, he had his big chest, that he got it from the days when he had polio. He's always pulling himself up because he couldn't use his legs. And I wanted to say to him, Ben, it's been 50 years. Maybe the muscles could have atrophied by then. No, at the age of 80, he still looked like he was a professional wrestler. But he never talked about it as if it was a tragedy in his life. And when you read his book and what he said, and other times, he always knew he was going to come out of it. It was part of this luck thing that he was not going to be paralyzed. And at the time people were, polio was really frightening. When I was a kid, when the polio epidemics hit, you couldn't go in the pool.

00:05:19:00

RICHARD COHEN:

You couldn't go in the water. You know, you couldn't—Parents were scared to death. And rightfully so. I think between the polio and the navy, going through the war for three and a half years, that he did feel fearless. And there was something about him that maybe he felt there was an aura around him

that he was kind of like bulletproof. But he proceeded as if he couldn't be touched or he couldn't be hurt. And it was awesome to watch because we all have fears. And I don't know to this day what Ben's were. I'm sure he had them. But as everybody's commented, he wasn't introspective. He didn't think a lot about what had just occurred. And he didn't muck around in his mistakes. He just kept on going.

Ben Bradlee's time in the navy

00:06:14:00

RICHARD COHEN:

We talked about his navy days. It taught him at a very young age that he had it. It being leadership qualities. He was 20, 21, 22. And he was number one on a destroyer. It was a war vessel. I don't know how many men were under him, 300, something like that. But they respected Mr. Bradlee. That's it. They took orders from Mr. Bradlee. He wasn't a kid. He knew how to do it. He knew how to make men work. He knew how to motivate people. He learned that at a very early age. World War II was an incredible breeding ground for management talent. The people who survived and came out of it went on to rule America until just yesterday. The Navy and the Navy experience taught Ben that he had it. It being leadership qualities. Men followed him, men respected him, men did what he wanted them to do. He learned how to motivate people. He knew that he was a leader.

00:07:11:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And when Ben walked out of his office at *The Washington Post* newsroom, it wasn't my observation, but somebody else said, everybody straightened up a little bit and they just put out their chest a little. And they got a little cocky. And if they were birds, the feathers would've been ruffled. But it was something to see. That's something you can't learn. He learned he had it and he learned how to use it.

Ben Bradlee's time in Paris

00:07:42:00

RICHARD COHEN:

First of all, Ben spoke French. He had been tutored in French as a child. And when he got to Paris, it was Paris in the 1950s and it was cheap, really cheap. It was so romantic. It was Paris. It was like the '20s all over again. Well, it wasn't the jazz age, it was something else. And he met incredible people. It was full, not full, but there were a lot of Americans there who wanted to be writers. There'd be origins of *The Paris Review*, of George Plimpton, of Stanley Karnow, of people whose names are not well known now. Irwin Shaw, the great writer, short story writer and also a novelist. Art Buchwald, who was living there at the time, who he met. And there are numerous people. Peter Stone, the screenwriter, he wrote *Charade* (1963) and that's set in Paris. These guys had a grand time. They lived on pennies a day, literally pennies a day.

00:08:40:00

RICHARD COHEN:

They never made much money while they were in Paris. They didn't need much money. But it was great. It was great to be an American in Paris in the 1950s. It was just an astounding period for those guys. And you could smoke, you could smoke and you could drink and you could smoke Gauloises and Gitanes and make love and have wine. And at the end of the week you owed somebody \$1.25. I think they were looking for adventure. I wasn't there. It was not my year, but I think they were looking for the same thing anybody looked for when they went to Paris in the '50s or any time. And they sort of pretended they were single. So, we were looking for adventure, I guess adventure is a word that covers a lot. It covers great desserts, it covers sex, it covers trips up to the Eiffel Tower. But adventure is what they were looking for. And when Tony met Bradlee, adventure is what she got.

Ben Bradlee as a foreign correspondent

00:09:39:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Ben covered North Africa and most part of the beat for *Newsweek*. So, that meant Algeria and the Algerian War and everything that was going on in North Africa. It also meant that he went to the Middle East, the Arab Israeli wars I think of 1967, I guess it was. Or '56. And it was pretty horrific. So, he saw action and he used to kid me all the time when I went over there and he asked me if I was going to take my trench coat and have people shoot holes in it. And I said, no. But he was the original. He was it. He was the foreign correspondent. And he writes in his book about how that movie *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) with Joel McCrea told him that this is the life I want to

lead. This is the life. This is great. And it was, it was a great life. And one of the great things about it, which is overlooked today, is not only that you were overseas and you were living on somebody else's dime, expense account, but you were far, far away from the home office, from your boss. There was no cell phone. You had to book a call two days ahead of time. So, you were on your own, living on your own. And it was a great life.

Ben Bradlee's romanticism

00:11:00:00

RICHARD COHEN:

He was a romantic. Look at it, look what he did. He started a newspaper, a small newspaper in New Hampshire with a partner. He went to Paris, he lived in Paris. He was a police reporter for *The Washington Post* when he first started. He loved the life. It's a romantic life. Nobody goes into it for the money. His colleagues and his classmates were all going to work in Wall Street or some law firm and leading really substantial lives, making a lot of money and being on boards and all that sort of stuff. And Ben was going into newspapering. And he writes also, there's a period of his life where he discovered love. He discovered sex and he discovered that he liked it. And he writes very frankly about it. He was a romantic. He wasn't married, this is not a guy who was married once, he married three times and then he married for the last time because he fell madly in love with Sally. And that lasted until he died.

Ben Bradlee's defiant character

00:12:05:00

RICHARD COHEN:

There was always something about him that was a rebel. And I said to him one time—There was a story in the Boston Globe, his hometown newspaper was running a story, I think about the Bank of Boston. There was some sort of scandal attached to it. And Ben said to me, "God, I wish we could do that story." And I said, "We could do that story, we can do any story we want." And he said, "No, it's not our story." I said, "It's your hometown bank." He said, "It's probably where you have your trust funds." And he said, "That's right." I said, "Ben, why do you always want to stick your finger into the eye of your own people?" And he looked at me, he said, "I don't know, but I do."

Ben Bradlee's friendship with JFK

00:12:44:00

RICHARD COHEN:

They weren't identical twins, but they were fraternal twins. They both came from Boston, the Boston area. So, they both had the same frames of reference. Kennedy was kind of a pretend Catholic. And Ben was a pretend Protestant. And they met somewhere in between. Kennedy was moving up a little bit in social status, if you were an old time Boston person. Ben was moving down purposely. He didn't want the state life, he didn't want to be around paisley pants and that sort of stuff. So, the two of them met, they both had been in the Navy. And the Navy proved to be great experiences for them, challenging experiences they had survived. And Kennedy more than Ben, went through hell. That PT-109 episode was hell. It made for a good movie and tie pins and

all. But you had to be scared. You had to be thinking this is not going to end well for me.

00:13:37:00

RICHARD COHEN:

So, he was challenged by it. Ben too was challenged by the Navy. He learned about fear, and I think he learned he didn't have it. And he learned as we said about leadership. Both of them learned that. They learned how to curse. They got a big kick out of cursing. I mean, Ben couldn't go three sentences without saying fuck. And neither could Kennedy. And I think Jackie got really upset with Ben when he did his book conversations with Kennedy and he had Kennedy cursing, because it violated the pretend aura of Camelot. You don't curse in Camelot. I think you sing like Richard Burton did. But they had that in common. They liked adventure, they liked challenges. They liked being who they were. They knew that they were exceptional men in a sense, they both knew it. Kennedy liked reporters. He liked journalism.

00:14:32:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And he even said to Ben that he was thinking about going into buying a newspaper after he left the presidency. And of course this was Ben's life. And Ben even mentioned at one point in the Grant Study that he was thinking of going into politics or in government. I think he had something in mind with Kennedy, that if Kennedy won, he would do it. I'm not sure he ever thought about it seriously. But this was a period where the two fields at the top were very close, government and journalism. And right here in Georgetown where we're talking today, this is at night where government and journalism came

together in the townhouses of some syndicated columnists and people who ran the newspapers in town and the bureaus in town. They'd talk to one another. They had great camaraderie. They were all part of the American elite and they appreciated each other for that. It's all changed.

00:15:25:00

RICHARD COHEN:

But Kennedy, on his inaugural eve wound up the night going to Joe Alsop's house in Georgetown, going to a small dinner there and a little party there. So, they were all together. And you can see in Kennedy's, even when he was president, his chats with Ben, they were often about journalism. He knew who the people were that mattered in this town. The Alsop brothers and the *New York Times* bureau chiefs and Ben and *Newsweek* and *Time*. And they both saw themselves as kind of the proprietors of America and American standards, American values. After all, they'd all come out of a war where there was no question about which side was the good side and which side was evil. And they had seen evil, they had known it. I mean, they had seen the concentration camps and the liberation of the concentration camps. And they had fought evil in the war. So, there was a great commonality, a bond between both the politicians and the journalists, because they had been through the same thing. They were pursuing the same aims in a different sort of way. And all that is gone. Vietnam killed it, Watergate killed it. And now we're two different breeds and we're at each other all the time.

JFK's personal life

00:16:47:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I don't know who knew about it. I know from my own investigation and reporting, the people in the White House knew about it. Secretaries knew about it, because there were secretaries who were being hit on by the president. For a guy with a bad back and Addison's disease, this is a guy who had kept a pretty busy schedule when it came to womanizing. I've always found it hard to believe that Ben didn't know. But I've asked him. I mean, I asked him straight out. Did you know? And he said no, he didn't know because there were two couples. There were the Kennedy's and the Bradlee's and that's how he usually saw them. So, they didn't talk that way. He didn't talk about womanizing if you were with the wives. And Ben was not a member of the Irish mafia. He was not in the inner inner circle of Kennedy's group. And there's even a kind of oblique reference in his memoir.

00:17:41:00

RICHARD COHEN:

There's a time when he's told he's invited to join the Kennedy's at some sort of party, the Grand Teton I think somewhere. And then at the last minute he's told by Larry O'Brien or one of those guys not to come. No, you're not invited. And the suggestion to me is that if you came, you'd see something we don't want you to see. And I think that was true, but I believe Ben. But at the same time it sort of, you know, it's not—it doesn't seem likely that that's the case. But we talked about it a number of times, and I remember once when one of the stories came out that sort of was appalling, it wasn't Judith Exner or the mob, the girl, which was bad enough, maybe it was the intern who was... They

would sneak out of the White House on the floor of the limos and she would be on the floor..

00:18:40:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Or nude swimming in the White House swimming pool and offering these women to members of the staff, I think the story is. And we talked about it and Ben was really appalled by it. By then I knew him very well. I could look at his body language and what he said, you know, he was appalled by it. And then when we were talking about all the reasons not to like Kennedy or not to admire Kennedy, he said, "But you should have seen him. But you should've seen him." And right there he comes at you in full color, radiant, this beautiful man who was not only beautiful, but when you listen to him and watch him, he was witty, he was ironic, he was educated, he was sophisticated. And so, he was a complete package. If he decided to be an actor, he would've been Cary Grant. But somebody else would've written these wonderful lines. Kennedy wrote his own lines. That's what Ben liked.

Abroad the Honey Fitz

00:19:49:00

RICHARD COHEN:

You can't get much higher and get a better high than to be on the Honey Fitz, the Kennedy yacht, the personal yacht. No, no, actually he renamed it. It was a government Navy, right. To be on the Honey Fitz, to being served lunch by navy stewards. The president of the United States, the first lady of the United States, you and your wife and the kids and there were other people on the

boat. And you're on this boat, you're sailing in Narragansett Bay, and the four of them are just beautiful. They're beautiful and they're rich and they're witty and they're smart and they're successful. And then it all ends. It's only a month and a half later after this picture was taken. A month and a half later that Kennedy is killed and it all goes to pieces there. And you even look at the kids on the boat, John Kennedy Jr. dying prematurely. It's— it's, you know, it's not a—There are terms for it, Shakespearean or Grisha or whatever it is, but it's a monumental tragedy because the beauty is just followed by such ugliness. You look at this and it's just so moving.

The aftermath of JFK's assassination on Ben Bradlee

00:21:05:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I think we talked about it, but I don't remember anything he said. I know what it meant to him. It was demolishing. It was really, really, really tough. And the way he dealt with it, the way he dealt with it is the way writers deal with almost anything. You put your head down, you write. And he immediately wrote that piece for *Newsweek*, which he later turned into a book, a very short book. And then he did this book, *Conversations with Kennedy* (1975). He went up to his shack in West Virginia. He used to call it a cabin. My God, it was a shack and it didn't even have a heater, it had a potbelly stove and it was a mess. And he went up there and he wrote and he recounts it. But that's what you do. You find solace in work. And he knew how to do that and not get diverted.

Journalism surrounding the Vietnam War

00:22:07:00

RICHARD COHEN:

The world changed. Vietnam was enormous change. Pentagon Papers, we all knew before the Pentagon Papers that Vietnam was a tissue of lies. We were in this awful war. Ben was then at *Newsweek* and later at *The Washington Post*. I was, you know, I had just been drafted. Later on my draft notice got rescinded. But you worked real hard about thinking about this war. And I did. And I certainly know that he did. So, the Vietnam War made a big difference.

The bond between Ben Bradlee and JFK

00:22:50:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I think the Kennedy experience, in retrospect, gave him something to think about and worry about. I think he knew he got too close. I know he knew he got too close. And yet how could you not? It's just, how do you say no when the president calls him and say do you want to come to dinner tonight at the White House? Will you say no, I have a professional obligation not to go, I don't want to get too close to you, the president of the United States, the source. The person who could say no to that deserves to be in the priesthood not in journalism. We've always had this problem in journalism about how close do we get to our sources and what happens when we fall in love with our sources. I don't mean sexual love, that kind of thing. You get to like the guy, you don't want to hurt the guy and you start seeing things through his

point of view. That's natural, that's part of the... And the president, you got a guard against it. But nobody ever got as close to a president as Ben did.

00:23:53:00

RICHARD COHEN:

It was unique in American history and American journalism. I think looking back, he sort of regretted that he did it. On the other hand, he didn't regret that he did it because it had been a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful ride.

Ben Bradlee's ethics

00:24:14:00

RICHARD COHEN:

The Nixon administration believed in conspiracy. So, they thought Bradlee was a Kennedy guy and the Kennedy guys were always out to get Nixon. And they believed there was this widespread Kennedy network that was always at work. And it was true. There were a lot of Kennedys out there and a lot of them were politically involved, but Ben wasn't part of that. He didn't use the paper for that reason. And there were people on the newspaper who were quite aware, of course we were, that Ben had been very close to Jack Kennedy and were really alert to how— We— we, you know, watching Ben for that too, and weren't going to put up with it. Ben imposed, generated, I don't know, seated and ethic at *The Washington Post*, which if he violated it would've cost him his job, or at least a staff rebellion. He told us what our ethics should be and we expected him to follow the same rules.

Ben Bradlee and Kay Graham

00:25:18:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Well, I always looked at it and I thought, you know, Kay Graham's father was called an investment banker, but he's a gambler. After a while you make enough money, you get a private railroad car and a three piece suit. You're an investment banker. But you gotta start by rolling the dice, and he rolled the dice. And then she marries a man who's a manic depressive, Phil Graham. And we didn't have words for that at the time. Nobody talked about manic depression. But she had to sense something out of the corner of her eye when he was on, when Phil Graham was on, he lit up the room. This guy was a 125 light bulb. Years afterwards, I didn't know Phil Graham, because I would go to people and say, tell me one thing Phil Graham did that was brilliant because he was always called brilliant. And he was brilliant apparently. But what I would get was stories of this incredible incandescent personality. So, you had a sense that this was the edge too.

00:26:16:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And then Ben comes along and Ben in effect says, you want to walk the edge with me? I will take you on the edge. I said, this will be exciting, but I will not be comfortable. You will— I mean, she knows it, and she says, here I go again, whoopee. That's my reading of it. It was a seduction, but it wasn't a romantic or a sexual one. And Ben was very careful about that. And he knew as well. And so was she. She was very insecure about running the business of *The Washington Post*. And she was a little bit insecure about journalism, because she was learning the rules. But she also had been raised in incredible wealth,

in one of the richest families in America. And then when they moved to Washington, one of the most powerful, richest families in Washington...

00:27:17:00

RICHARD COHEN:

In those days, you know, I remember the police reporter at *The Washington Post* when I first got there, he used to tell me that he would go with the chief of police to Katharine Graham's parents' house to walk through it once a year to make sure it was secure. Now, you couldn't even get a cop to do that. They had that kind of standing and power and they knew everybody. So, yes she was secure on one level, on the other level, she knew who she was and she was a princess.

How the Pentagon Papers changed *The Washington Post*

00:27:52:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Well, first we have to understand that when I first came to *The Washington Post*, some people in New York, the few people in New York—The only way I knew *The Washington Post* was Herblock's cartoons ran in the *New York Post*. That was it. And it had no national profile whatsoever. *The Washington Star* was the paper of record in Washington, the establishment newspaper. It meant... Publishing the Pentagon Papers meant putting *The Washington Post* on the map. But it made it an important paper. It also meant that Katharine Graham was going to back Ben Bradlee, that this was a dangerous newspaper now. Dangerous if you were a lying politician, dangerous if you were a corrupt person. And the reason it was, it was because Katharine Graham—

The Washington Post had just gone public, issuing public stock. So, the fact that you are going to go public, you have a certain amount of time in which the bankers can reverse themselves in case there's some sort of cataclysmic event. If you publish the Pentagon Papers and the *New York Times* has already been enjoying not to publish it.

00:28:55:00

RICHARD COHEN:

So, you are aware that you may be breaking the law. Breaking the law and making a corporation a felon means the bankers can reverse themselves and a felon cannot own television stations. *The Washington Post* company owned television stations. So, there was enormous risk. And now Katharine Graham is facing a board of directors. And who are they? They're businessmen. They weren't journalism. Journalism is for kids. It was just journalism. And Ben Bradlee is saying, no, no, we publish this thing, we publish this. And Katharine Graham and after weighing this thing and really worrying about it as she had a fiduciary obligation to do, calls Ben and says go. End of story. I had nothing to do with that. I was new with the paper, but I remember that day in the newsroom, and it was explosive. I'm sorry, I still get... And Ben, I don't think he touched the ground all day. He just walked around the newsroom. It was wonderful. And lucky me, I was at *The Washington Post*. Who knew.

Watergate and the *Post*

00:30:15:00

RICHARD COHEN:

There was worry plenty about the post coverage of *The Washington Post*, because Bob and Carl were out there all alone. And who were they? They were new guys from the city side, the metropolitan side of the paper. They had no national reputation. And so, you know, it was widely disbelieved. And there were a lot of people... Look, I was very close to Carl, I mean very, very close and to Bob, but less so. But I was there, a barnacle on this whole ship. And some days I wondered, and I would say to Carl, the president of the United States does not get involved in a burglary. And this is not the way politics is played. This is stupid. This is a bad movie. This is not the way it's really done. Well, it turns out it was better than a bad movie. It was a really good movie in the end. But we all had doubts. I mean we all, I'm not talking about Carl and Bob, but there were moments. And Ben, I don't know if Ben did, Katharine did. She says it to Ben, how come this is such a great story, we're all alone?

00:31:18:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And it was being mocked by other more senior people in town. And they were saying what I was saying, this is not how politics is done. They were wrong. And Bob and Carl were right. And Ben stood by them, and Katharine stood by Ben. It was day, by day, by day, by day, story after story, after story, drip, drip, drip, attrition, attrition, attrition. And it's a lesson not just for today, but forever. You run a story, you run a story and you run what you know. And guess what, somebody calls and says, actually there's more. And then you run that story, and two other people call and say, actually there's more. And before you know it, you're hearing from secretaries who type the memo and

FBI guys who can't stand liars. And people like Mark Felt who come out, he's there. This is what happens in life.

00:32:21:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And it's not just about—It's about great journalism, it's about doing what you have to do every day. I remember covering Spiro Agnew when he gave a speech attacking the press. Was to National Women's Republican Group of some sort. Very nice middle aged and up women with purple hair. And literally some of them got up on their chairs and cheered when he denounced the press. I was so taken aback by it. But to me it was the beginning of this kind of stuff. Nixon did it repeatedly all the time and blamed the press. And Ziegler, his press secretary blamed the press. I didn't feel any of that in the newsroom. I didn't feel any of that mattered. I didn't feel like Ben Bradlee was going to pay attention to it or trim our sales on account of it. I didn't think Katharine Graham gave a damn about what Richard Nixon said. It gave her a couple awkward moments at a cocktail party here or there, but she was a tough lady and she knew what she was doing and Ben did too.

00:33:27:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And I'm telling you, I never thought there would be a story... I couldn't imagine Ben Bradlee killing a story for political reasons. It was just inconceivable to me. We knew that Watergate was a big bore to most American people. And Nixon won on a landslide. It was quite clear by November that there were serious questions about what had happened, was there a coverup and that sort of stuff. It didn't matter. And by that time he had

the so-called blue collar vote, the construction workers in New York who were beating up anti-war protestors. It was early Trump in that sense. And the only thing that I wonder about now is that what saved us or made a difference is that Nixon couldn't tweet. But if he could at night when he was in a serious drinking mood, God knows what he would've tweeted.

The impact of *All the President's Men* on journalism

00:34:34:00

RICHARD COHEN:

That movie and what preceded the movie was a tsunami of publicity and distraction. I mean, I've sat there—as I said, I was Carl's close friend, close to Bob. Watching Carl go from being an ordinary reporter to a rockstar. It was like sitting there and saying, are they talking about this guy? But it was marvelous, it was unreal. And Robert Redford in the newsroom, not all the time but a lot. And Dustin Hoffman. And because I was close to Carl, I got to spend a lot of time with Redford and Hoffman. So, it was not your ordinary day. And Redford would show up in the newsroom and women would come from all over. We always wondered about how they knew Redford was coming. They were like pilot fish. They would arrive first. The women from commercial and... So, it was great.

00:35:43:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And it was remarkable to all of a sudden be the focus of— of really worldwide attention. And it changed Washington. Watergate changed Washington. Washington had been a provincial capital, not a small town. I don't want to

overdo it, but it had been a little place and all of a sudden it was back to, I don't know, I guess what Paris was in the '20s. Writers came from all over, not just journalists, but writers and novelists and moviemakers and celebrities. They wanted to be in Washington. Rich people took apartments in the Watergate just to be in Washington. And suddenly you were in this place that had celebrities and movie stars and actual novelists and not just reporters covering the agriculture department. I know somebody who covers the agriculture department will hear this. The town went into a kind of, it just lifted it up. It was very exciting. And at the same time, it was threatening because you knew it wasn't going to last. You didn't want to change.

00:36:58:00

RICHARD COHEN:

You were journalists and you were raised to believe that you were never the story. The story was the story. And all of a sudden Bob and Carl were the story. And *The Washington Post* was the story. The people at *The Washington Post* was the story, Ben Bradlee was the story. He became bigger than any editor in American history. And then Ben actually ordered a story to be done on the effect that the making of the movie was having on the newsroom of *The Washington Post*. And I remember, I probably shouldn't tell this story, but somebody said in the piece in *The Washington Post* that every time Redford came over to talk to me, I had an orgasm. And the *Village Voice* asked me for my response, it was a woman who said that, and I said that woman wouldn't know an orgasm from an asthma attack. And that's the way it went. We had a little fight after that. But it changed us. It did.

00:37:57:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And it made the *Post* a different newspaper. It made journalism different. It attracted people from all over who wanted to become reporters, wanted to become investigative reporters, wanted of course to be Bob and Carl and have movies made after them. That kind of life. That never happened before. And it wasn't that it happened somewhere else a little bit, it never happened before, anything like it. There were journalism stars locally before that. There was Jimmy Breslin in New York, there was Margaret O'Hara, there were some big people around, but nothing like this. Absolutely nothing. And to see Carl go from the guy who had the desk next to mine, and was my close friend to the celebrity, was just plain discombobulating. It was interesting. How did it change Ben? I think it put him on alert. He knew what was happening. He was very aware of what was going on. And he was very aware, even more so of being Ben Bradlee.

00:39:00:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I remember one time we were going somewhere, he was driving and I was sitting next to him and both of us were going to give a toast, I don't remember the event. And I said to him, "You know, Ben, my toast is brilliant. Every line is a gem." I said, "I've worked on it really hard for a week". I said, "you sitting here right now, don't have any idea what you're going to say and you're going to get up on the stage and you're going to say fuck. And then everybody afterwards they're going to tell me how brilliant you were." And he looked at me and he said, "Eat your heart out, Cohen." He knew it. He knew it, but he didn't fall for it. He understood. He knew too that... Look, he earned it, he put

his career on the line. Those were very tough days. And in the movie it makes it look easy. You don't have the story, that kind of stuff. But it was tough. And he did it. And I think he felt he did the right thing, not just once, not on a big story, but every day. And he earned it.

Ben Bradlee hired the best reporters

00:40:11:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Well, those guys felt it. I didn't. A lot of people who came after Watergate were very conscious of this competition between reporters and the judgment of Ben and all that. I didn't feel it, but I guess it was true. *The Washington Post* had been elevated to a very high level in American journalism. If you went to work at *The Washington Post*, you didn't want to work anywhere else. It wasn't like you were going to start at the *Nashville Tennessean*, a very good newspaper, but a feeder newspaper for *The Washington Post* or the *New York Times*. But if you went to *The Washington Post*, you weren't a feeder newspaper or anything. We never even went to the *New York Times*. So, if you failed, you failed all the way. You fail from the highest level. It was a long way down. So, there was that kind of pressure. But, you know, being— because of Ben, because of the *Post* he attracted such great talent.

00:41:13:00

RICHARD COHEN:

The writing talent was so incredible. I'd look around that newsroom and think everybody here is a Goddamn genius. And at reporting, too. Now, I don't understand how reporters work half the time because I don't know how

Woodward does what Woodward does. But the writing that would appear in *The Washington Post* and the creation of the style section, that was literature. Those writers were so great. You can go through bookshelves now and I'll take down books by David Maraniss or by Rick Atkinson and Woodward and Bernstein, and I'll go on and on and on. I'm trying to think of others. I could probably come up with two dozen really great writers who wrote wonderful stuff. And they were there in the newsroom doing ordinary stuff much of the time. But just incredible stuff that would make you stop and say, oh my God, this is in a daily newspaper.

00:42:09:00

RICHARD COHEN:

This is a little bit like the *New York Herald Tribune* in its last days when you had Tom Wolfe and Jimmy Breslin and some others and writing, experimenting with journalism saying we could do it this way, we could do it this way. With Ben, you could do anything you wanted. You could do anything you wanted as long as you got it right. Don't make a mistake, don't make it up, don't cheat. If you got it right, you could do anything you wanted. And that's what he told me when he offered me a column. He said, "Just get it right, don't get it wrong." And I did anything I wanted to do.

The legacy of Watergate

00:42:49:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I assume some people thought there was another Watergate out there. And there may well be, but I never felt there was. I just think that it was such a—

You know, to revert to a cliché, a perfect storm of events ending with Nixon incriminating himself. You're not going to have that happen again where a president of the United States tapes himself, records himself committing crimes. It took Nixon to figure that one out. So, that kind of story I just don't think is going to happen. But when the *Post* broke the story about Donald Trump's obscene banter with Entertainment Tonight or whatever it was, that story I felt uh oh, here we go again. All of a sudden the center of the world was in *The Washington Post* and the things were starting to pivot because of something *The Washington Post* had done. And I feel it today with the reporting of Donald Trump, that this paper is back in the groove and doing what Ben wants it to do.

Janet Cooke and the story that never happened

00:44:06:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Ben made a mistake with Janet Cooke. Ben made the ultimate mistake, because that's where the buck stopped. But every editor in line made a mistake because they didn't say, who is your source, where is your source and check it out. Ben said at one point, I think before Janet Cooke, the anonymous source would say, when you cite an anonymous source, you were citing the prestige and the honesty or whatever it is of the paper itself. You were saying the newspaper stands behind this. And I thought that was an important point. And the anonymous sources are invaluable. They're essential. There are times you absolutely have to use them, but somebody has to know who they are. And that's where Ben screwed up on Janet Cooke. And she got away

with it. On the other hand, you don't expect somebody to make it up. There's very little you can do to defend against a liar. And she was a good liar. I tip my hat for that. That story, I've read it a couple of times now, is well done fib.

00:45:15:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Oh, it hurt. It hurt. It hurt in a lot of ways. It hurt because it hurt the newspaper. It hurt because—Look, there were a lot of people out there as in journalism who had it in for Ben. You could walk to Ben on an invisible belt of envy and never touch ground. Everybody around him said, who is this son of a bitch? He came out of nowhere, this Boston Brahmin guy who drinks martinis and stirs it with his finger or something like that. And he's not us, we're grunts. We've done all this hard work all these years. And I remember going to, I think it was the editor's convention, and they had this reception at the Kennedy Center. And I was proposing, it's a long story, but I was there and Ben came in with Phil Geyelin, who's the editorial page editor, and Meg Greenfield, who's the deputy editorial page editor. And he came into this group and it parted for them. They were celebrities.

00:46:25:00

RICHARD COHEN:

There were like 400 editors in that room and Ben and these guys were the celebrities. No one else knew who anybody else was. It was like everybody was in black and white and the three people from the *Post* were in color. But you could feel these people angry at that. And so, it was this worst kind of glee in that this person who they thought got away with it on the cheap, which was just a lie, was now taken down a Peg or two. So, that hurt. And

then he knew he had made a mistake. He knew he had screwed up and it hurt him. We try to jolly him up and make him feel good. And I think sometimes I remember this wrong, but we went to a colleague's house afterwards and tried to make him feel good and there were a small group of us and within, I don't know, 22 and a half minutes, he was making us feel good. And he was the leader once again. We were not going to help him, he was going to help us. It was as simple as all that.

00:47:33:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And then he had the ombudsman to do that exhaustively long piece on how the Janet Cooke thing went off the rails. And to this day, it's compelling reading. He let it all out there, he gave everybody in the newsroom orders. You tell the truth, you tell this guy everything you knew. And it was embarrassing, because some of us knew pretty quickly that this story was phony. I did not know when it appeared in the paper. I read that story and I went, oh my God, I couldn't believe it. A day or two later I knew it was false. And I knew because I started to write a column about it. And as I was writing the column, because writing is an intense way of thinking, it fell apart. I was saying, wait a minute, a junkie is shooting up an eight year old kid. This junkie's giving it away. This junkie wouldn't give his mother 25 cents to take a bus to go to a clinic. And he's shooting up this kid in front of a reporter. This doesn't make any sense. And I go through it and go...

00:48:32:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And then I picked up the buzz in the newsroom that some people knew. They knew because they knew Janet Cooke didn't know what she was talking about. They knew the neighborhood, they knew the ghetto, if I can use that term. They knew these things. We didn't. And I think Ben felt that too, that very, very heavy sense of would we have treated that invisible, imaginary eight year old kid differently if he lived in Georgetown? Then would we have cared so much about the story or the kid? Woodward has put it brilliantly. And Woodward was responsible for it in some way. It weighs heavily on him. He understood and I think Ben understood the social and racial judgments that were made that went into the Janet Cooke story, including the fact that Janet Cooke was Black and we assumed that she knew what she was talking about. She didn't.

00:49:33:00

RICHARD COHEN:

One thing that Ben didn't know and after it... Walter Pincus, who was another reporter on the *Post* and close friend of Ben's, we went into his office. He had this big glass office, he believed in the open newsroom so everybody could see everything. And so, instead of seeing people in enclosed offices, you'd see them. And I tell Ben now, they think it's open, but people see you in there with their editor they think you're talking about them and they're... So, it just increases the paranoia in this place. But we went into Ben, I said "Look Ben, a lot of people in the newsroom knew that the story was no good and nobody came in to see you, even though you have this open door policy, this open door policy doesn't work. People are afraid to tell you the truth." And he looked at Pincus and I and he said, "Get the fuck out of here." So, we left.

Quinn Bradlee's birth

00:50:29:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Right from the start, it had an enormous effect on him. Quinn, within days of being born, had medical problems, heart problems, all kinds of stuff. And then things associated with his syndrome. I lost track of the amount of times he went into the hospital. The amount of times it looked like he was going to die. His life was in danger. This was very poignant. It would be poignant for anybody, but it was particularly poignant because Ben Bradlee, and to an extent Sally, were people who had enormous control over their lives. They had power, they had wealth, they had standing, they had health, they have everything a person would want. And all of a sudden the thing that matters most to you in that moment seems to be slipping out of your control, out of anybody's control. So, there is a kind of, you know, I guess poignancy is the word, and it changed him.

00:51:33:00

RICHARD COHEN:

He was a busy guy when he was a father before that, enormously busy. He was like a lot of men building a career. Yeah kid, no, we'll play catch later. That sort of stuff. We're all guilty of that. And he was guilty of it and he knew it. And here was Quinn, here was an opportunity to make it all right. He had made his career, he had made his bones, he didn't have to be in the office until nine o'clock at night. He could actually take weekends off. And so, it was that period where the thing that you wanted most, the thing you wanted most for

yourself, but above all the thing you wanted most for the woman you loved. Now Sally, who was not a 20 year old when he met her, was in jeopardy. So, it was a scary period for him, a scary time. And I think he rediscovered both who he was and what there was besides journalism. And he moved on.

00:52:44:00

RICHARD COHEN:

He didn't become noticeably a different person. He wasn't all of a sudden spouting religious stuff. But I know what it did to him. It was a very tough period. What I remember was like a nonstop calamity. Not time enough to be introspective or reflect on fatherhood, because in fact you were rushing to the hospital a lot and watching and afraid of fever spiking and all of that kind of stuff. All the things that were associated with Quinn at the time. And I remember they had this party and took over a restaurant called Nora's and Ben toasted Quinn's heart surgeon. And to toast the heart surgeon and your kid is this big, it's different than Watergate.

Ben Bradlee leaving the *Post*

00:54:00:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Ben told one of the editors, Tom Wilkinson, that Wilkinson should tell him when it was time to go, when he had slowed up a step or whatever you want to call it. And then he told me that and he looked at me and he said, "I want you to tell me that too Cohen, you tell me when it's time to go." And I said, "Are you out of your mind?" I'm going to tell you when it's time to go. You're going to tell me that I have to go. He said, "Fucking A." But he was getting

bored. He had done it. He had built this great organization. The newsroom was– was... reflected everything he cared about and he wanted it to be. But he had done it and I think he thought it was time to go. I don't think he was pushed, but there was nowhere else for him to go. But when he left, the day that he left, I'll never forget it because I remember giving a toast. I was one of those who gave a toast in the newsroom.

00:55:04:00

And the newsroom then was the height of *The Washington Post*. The newsroom was vast, it was like three quarters of a city block and hundreds of people. And Katharine Graham always knew their names and Don did too. But I don't know how, it was something in the Graham genetic makeup. I knew 10 names. I remember looking out at the newsroom and the immense number of people, it wasn't every day that you got everybody into the office because they were out in bureaus and reporting and stuff. And my son was in Costa Rica at the time and he needed money. He ran out of money or something. He was just a kid. And so, I had to run to Western Union and wire him money. So, after I gave my little toast, I ran to Western Union and I came back, ran back to *The Washington Post*. I was coming into the newsroom as Ben and Sally were walking out, and he was finally leaving the paper. And all these people got up and applauded him and cheered him. I was so moved by it. The fact that I was moved by it is kind of incidental, but he was moved by it. It's not often that you saw Ben look down and try to hold back a tear. But it was all there in that one shot. Ben and Sally and the great newsroom with all that talent, all that love. They loved him.

The importance of the *Post*

00:56:36:00

RICHARD COHEN:

This was a monopoly on power and glamor. And it was *The Washington Post*, it was Washington, this is a one horse town in many respects. And *The Washington Post* became the center of the power and the glamour. And Nixon was followed by Ford, not glamorous, Jimmy Carter not exactly glamorous. And it was phenomenal. The thing is that Ben knew everybody. In a lifetime of journalism and being a Bradlee, he knew everybody. I was reading Walter Lippmann's biography by Ronald Steel, and he talks about Walter Lippmann stopped off at the Bradlee's on the way to Europe when— in the 1920s. So, the Harvard, Navy, JFK thing, he knew everybody and he was already a celebrity of sorts. And then Sally was the star writer for the style section. She came into that section and she was like, stop the show. It was Barbra Streisand singing in some sort of Broadway play.

00:57:50:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And so, it was big. And they had parties and everybody came to the parties. The parties in the Hamptons when they got the house, Grey Gardens in the Hamptons, were spectacular. I got accustomed to some of this. It wasn't like I was totally a naive person about this. But sitting next to Lauren Bacall to me was a thrill. Less so for Lauren Bacall, but more for me. And the whole New York crowd that came around and the Paris crowd that came back. I don't know if Ben ever lost track of them, but Peter Matthiessen and Peter Stone and then what's his name, Alan Pakula who stayed part of the crowd, the

director of *All the President's Men*, a great director. And also Sidney Lumet, a fabulous director and a great rocking tour and an extraordinary man.

00:58:52:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Well, all these people gathered, or a lot of these people gathered, and Nora Ephron and Nick Pileggi and Carl and Ken and all these people gathered in the Hamptons. And it was the Hamptons at its splendid best. One night, Ben's birthday party, I forgot which party it was. Norman Lear came, Norman became close to Ben. Norman Lear came and he got 20 or 25 or 30 violinists from New York to come out on a bus in tuxedos to play Happy Birthday to him. And these guys come in and they start playing Happy Birthday. They're all like wedding violinists, happy birthday to you. And they take a look at who's sitting there, Isaac Stern. And these guys are the fiddlers. And Stern goes over to one of them and says, "Can I borrow your fiddle?" And the guy is thinking to himself, Isaac Stern wants to borrow my fiddle. Those were the nights and it was, I must be forgetting a lot, but they were extraordinary and very warm.

01:00:02:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I know it sounds glittery and there's celebrity name dropping and that sort of stuff. But people loved Ben. They absolutely loved him. And he loved them. These were great nights. They were warm and Ben would always respond to the toast. And it was great. And then at the end, when he started to fail, he responded to the toast one time, he got up and he started to talk and then he totally lost himself. He got lost and he didn't make any sense for 30 seconds

or maybe less. And he looked at us and he knew it. He looked at us all and he said, "You fuckers will get old someday, too." And we all just laughed and he laughed. That was Bradlee.

How Ben Bradlee would have reported on Trump

01:00:52:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I think Ben would've taken a bit in his teeth and gone to work just like Marty Baron is doing now and would've done a story a day. That's all. And gone after the story. And he would've gotten up a little bit earlier every day because of Trump and gone to bed a little bit later, but essentially done what he did every day, which was turnout journalism.

Ben Bradlee valued integrity

01:01:26:00

RICHARD COHEN:

Ben's greatest trait was honesty. He was always honest, and he was honest in a way that even if he told you something that hurt, he did it so honestly that you were flattered by it. I used to remark about this, about people who Ben fired would talk about him as if he was the close friend. And I remember Sally telling a story about one day they were driving somewhere in southern Maryland and they stopped and they bumped into some guy who said, hey Ben how you doing? Oh God, it's great to see you and everything. And they drove off and Sally said, who was that? He said, "That's somebody I fired years ago." He made you feel good and the honesty was probably... I don't

know what the single trait is, he loved so much being Ben Bradlee. He loved a good time. He loved to laugh. He just...

01:02:23:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I laughed a lot with Ben. That's why he loved Art Buchwald. Can you think of two more opposite people than Benjamin Crowninshield Bradlee of Boston and Art Buchwald? Where the hell was he from? With that distinctive New York accent. But he loved the guy and he was very loyal to him. Art became sick and Ben always came to see him, always took care of him. Always looked out after him. He was a loyal friend. Art made Ben laugh and Ben cherished that.

Ben Bradlee chose his words carefully

01:03:11:00

RICHARD COHEN:

I know Ben enjoyed using profanity. He knew the power of the words and he also knew that they were, what's the word, there's a paradox when he used it because they weren't organic. It was a vocabulary he picked up in the Navy. I think Kennedy was the same way, that he enjoyed it and he liked it. And his way of communicating with his guys at his level coming down a little bit from where he was, or coming up actually, because he was just a second generation Irish kid. Third generation, whatever. But they reveled in it and they knew it was shocking. And Ben also said it with a smile. Ben was good nature. I don't know who Ben hated. He hated Nixon after a while. There were some people he hated. He hated people who picked on little people. He hated that.

01:04:14:00

RICHARD COHEN:

But in every day of life, he didn't run across people he hated. And everybody got an embrace, was open, but he knew the power of profanity and curse words. And he employed them for that reason. And it worked.

Ben Bradlee's insistence on truth and fairness

01:04:36:00

RICHARD COHEN:

He was... not perfect. There was one story about a guy who got this appointment, this incredible obscure appointment from Ronald Reagan, some federal board, but he was a money guy. He donated money so he got something, a piece of parchment to hang on the wall and a picture with Ronald Reagan. And then he was so full of himself he went home to, I think Minnesota somewhere, and his golf club. And he joined in the tournament and he got caught cheating. He moved the ball. And so, they brought him up on charges and they sentenced him to a year suspension at the club. And also he had to seek psychiatric help to determine why he was compelled to cheat. And all this got written up in the country club newsletter and we got hold of it somehow.

01:05:28:00

RICHARD COHEN:

And this guy pleaded, please don't run the story. Don't run the story. And he said, "It'll ruin me and embarrass me in the eyes of Ronald Reagan." So, Ben said, "What would you do?" So, I said, Reagan doesn't know this guy exists. I

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

said, I don't care about this story. I said, but this is a great story of America. I said, probably you can find 30 people in this country club cheat on their taxes, cheat on their wives. The country club probably won't admit Blacks or Jews everything, but if you move the ball, you got to have psychiatric help. And Ben looked at me, perfect WASP to the end, he said, "But he moved the ball."

END TC:01:06:09:00