ROBERT KAISER INTERVIEW
THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

ROBERT KAISER
Managing Editor, The Washington Post (1991-1998)
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Interviewed by: John Maggio
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ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Robert Kaiser

Managing Editor, *The Washington Post* (1991-1998)

The Washington Post

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ROBERT KAISER:

I arrived in June 1963. I was a member of the first class of summer interns at *The Washington Post*, a job I got literally because the crazy city editor at the time who chose the interns was a patient of Doctor Howard Geyser, leading Washington psychoanalyst, my first cousin, who put in a word for me. Ben was not there then. He—Ben—came back—he had been there earlier, as you know. He came back in '65 when I was—in London already as a graduate

student and part-time *Post* employee. But it's very important that you and viewers understand, I think, how mediocre the *Washington Post* was before Bradlee. It was a second-rate provincial newspaper. It had one or two—two foreign correspondents. Its Pentagon reporter moonlit as the editor of the Air Force Reserve Officers' monthly magazine. And it was just—it was remarkably—unimpressive enterprise, which had a great editorial page, the world's finest political cartoonist, Herb Block, America's best sports columnist in my view, Shirley Povich, a great pal of Ben's. But the gentleman running the place was mediocre.

The *Post* vs. The *Times*

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ROBERT KAISER:

It would be fun to know the budgets of the two—two newsrooms, but *The Times* would have had to have been three times greater then. It was—they had 20 or 30 foreign correspondents. They had bureaus all over the country. They had lots of things that we did not have. It wasn't-- nobody thought of *The Times*—of *The Post* in the same breath as *The Times*. There were many other better papers, starting in Baltimore. *The Baltimore Sun* was a better paper. There was just—it wasn't—it wasn't a contest.

First impressions of Ben Bradlee

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ROBERT KAISER:

Well, it was funny because—Ben met me, happily, it was good for me as a byline from his London bureau because his predecessor, Alfred Friendly had

taken a shine to me, I guess, and had asked me, when I went to London to be a graduate student at the London School of Economics in '64, which was really a draft dodge on my part. He said, "Why don't you do some work in the London bureau?" and—an opportunity which I jumped to take. And—in those days, because Alfred Friendly was a hopeless Anglophile and probably much—too much news about Britain in *The Washington Post*, I—I had quite a few bylines. And I don't think Ben realized initially that I was 22 years old, but that's what I was. So when we met, while I was still in London, he came over on—a visit to the bureau.

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First time we ever—met was probably '65 or—or '66 I would say. I can't remember when. It may have been a party in Paris when the *Post* celebrated its partnership with *The New York Times* and *The Herald Tribune*. I can't remember. Anyway, that was—I was—I was eager to meet him. And it was-- a great moment, but I don't remember it very well. So it was—it was not—how to say this. The impression Ben made went—happened outside the parameters of the moment, for sure. It was a big deal for me to finally meet him, and to be acknowledged by him, that was the big thing for me.

Ben Bradlee's appointment to the *Post*

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ROBERT KAISER:

I've been—I saw Katharine Graham in London, long complicated story, at a big party week that Ben's appointment to the *Post* was announced—which must have been Spring '65, June, maybe July. And we all realized it was a big deal. And I—I had never met Mrs. Graham before, but I was a hopelessly

brazen young man, and I went up to her and introduced myself. And I said, "I see this exciting news. That looks like it may portend new-- new developments" or something like that. And she was taken aback, but she affirmed that, "Yes, this did portend something." And so we—we—we got the message early on that it was gonna be—he was gonna do something.

Ben Bradlee transformed the *Post*

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ROBERT KAISER:

Ben's great line was, "Always hire people that are smarter than you." And—he did it an amazing number of times. And to his everlasting credit, it never bothered him. He was proud of it. He had no insecurities. He understood his own limitations, lived with 'em very comfortably. But the first steps were to identify a few people who he inherited, who he liked. One was called Howard Simons, who later became his managing editor, was a very good science writer. The other was a remarkable man called Laurence Stern who had done a fabulous expose, the first of many in the history of the Maryland State Government involving the savings and loan industry in Maryland. And Stern had gotten national attention for his expose. And Ben had taken a great shine to him. As soon as he could, he made Stern the national editor.

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ROBERT KAISER:

Ben always considered the national staff the heart of the paper, the most important part. That was the people who covered Congress, The White House, politics, the Pentagon, the State Department. And that's what he cared about the most, always. And he made Stern the editor. And they started hiring

people, and they hired remarkable people. Don Oberdorfer came from night newspapers. David Broder came from *The New York Times* to be the senior political writer. Haynes Johnson came from *The Washington Evening Star*. Richard Cohen came from New York, you know. That was later. But—it was an exciting time because the word went out. Broder was the biggest. Broder was a well-known political writer. He started on *The Evening Star*. *The Evening Star* in Washington was a better paper than *The Post* when I—started with the *Post* in '63 with a bigger staff and smarter people.

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ROBERT KAISER:

And Haynes was the star reporter at the *Star*. And B—I'm sorry. Broder was the star political reporter. David Broder was the star political reporter at the *Evening Star*, and he'd been lured away by *The New York Times*. And David, bless him, had the—the reaction to *The New York Times* that we all wanted people to have, which was, "Who are these pompous sons of bitches? Why do they take themselves so seriously? Why is nobody in this industry ever having any fun? I hate this." And this word got out quickly, and Ben jumped and went to Broder and said, "I wanna have fun. I wanna laugh in the office." "Come and work with us." And David came, and as he told people for 40 years afterwards, it was the smartest thing he ever did. And that, of course, was the hallmark. We did laugh. We had just the best possible time because Ben just loved doing it. He just loved the process. He loved the villainous characters in politics. He loved exposing the liars. And—you know, the biggest compliment I think Ben can pay anyone was, "Oh, he makes me laugh." That's what we all aspired to. And if you ever got that, oh, man. That was a big day. It was wonderful.

Ben Bradlee's persona

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ROBERT KAISER:

Ben's… secret, I always believed, was sex appeal. And it worked for men as well as women, straight men. There was something thrilling and exciting. Ward Just was one of his great early hires, became a famous novelist. Ward was, for—the first good reporter *The Post* had in Vietnam. *The Post* had avoided sending a reporter to Vietnam for much too long. Finally, when Ben was in charge, they sent one guy who wasn't very good. And then, they sent Ward, who was wonderful. In my view, the best single American reporter during the war. But Ward used to say, working for Ben Bradlee, "You know you're working for the kind of guy you would happily take a bullet for." And then, he took a bullet for him. He got—it was actually shrapnel from a grenade. But Ward was badly wounded and—covering the war in Vietnam.

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ROBERT KAISER:

And I always laughed about it afterwards. He said, "Well, I did it for Ben. It was—it was easy." But we all felt that way. You've got the famous Nora Boustany story from his retirement ceremony in the newsroom. Nora Boustany was—a Lebanese born remarkable young woman. That's a young woman who worked as the Beirut correspondent of the *Post* for 20 years, I guess, long time. But was then back in Washington. We loved Nora. She wasn't a great—she was a great reporter. She's not a writer in English, but we were—we were nice to her. We tried to make her into a reporter. And she was there that day, and it was a classic newsroom ceremony. It's called a caking,

where you—you have—bring in cakes and people give toasts to someone who's retiring. And Ben decided he would have a caking for himself. And Nora gave this talk, which Ben quotes wonderfully in his book which you can find. I think there's film of it, actually.

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ROBERT KAISER:

But she says, "Whenever the bombs are exploding, whenever the shit was hitting the fan, we always knew that there was this wonderful man in Washington that we were doing this for. And we were thrilled and excited to be able to—to feel that and to do it." It was—charisma is one of the rarest—true charisma, of human qualities, and it's awfully hard to figure out what—what it consists of, why—why somebody really is charismatic. But you know it when you see it. And Ben Bradlee was really charismatic. He had this pull, this kind of magnetism. People wanted to be close. People wanted to be noticed by him and praised by him. He was a very powerful force, and it did have a sexual element, I believe, particularly vividly for Sally, obviously, but-- but for all of us in a weird way. We all felt—I felt more like a real man if I was basking in the glow of Ben Bradlee. I was more virile. I was better looking. I was smarter. It was interesting. Very powerful.

The value of the front page story

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ROBERT KAISER:

You know, in the—in the Bradlee era before computers and so on, the only thing that mattered was the front page. And I—I remember there was a moment in the late '70s—when all of the papers, including the *Post,* gave up

the old traditional eight column format and went to a six column format. The typo—typography was much more attractive and appealing. It was much easier to read the paper, but it meant that instead of ten or 11 front-page stories every day, there was only six or seven. And this was a big deal to lose three or four opportunities every day to be on the front page. I remember, this must exist somewhere, writing Ben—a truly ridiculous memo, which I typed out.

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ROBERT KAISER:

But it was a very accurate reflection of the anxiety among people like me. "Have you thought this through? Do you realize the implication of going from 11 front-page stories to seven? It's gonna have a bad effect on morale." It's—completely ridiculous of me to do that. I don't think he replied. I don't remember any reply. But it was—you know, it was ignored as it should have been. But—that was—that was the currency we all traded in. And everybody knew that Ben made the final decisions. So the answer to your question is absolutely 'cause you were writing to get on the front page. And—and that meant doing it—in a way that Ben would find satisfactorily pleasing, would make him laugh, whatever it was.

The *Post* strived to be unpredictable and exciting

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ROBERT KAISER:

Well, you've heard his expression, a real tube ripper. It's—got a funny origin. It'd be hard to explain quickly. The rules of the United States Post Office preclude the use of personal mailboxes for the receipt of home delivery of

newspapers. Most *Washington Post* home sub—subscribers lived in suburbs. And they had to get a tube, which was provided by the *Washington Post* delivery service, that—where they often was attached right below the regular US Postal Service mailbox. But it was—it was a tube, and the paperboys, of whom I should say I was one in 1953-1954—I myself delivered *The Washington Post* in Bethesda, Maryland, at the age of nine and ten. Anyway, the delivery boy would put the—roll the paper up and slip it in the tube.

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ROBERT KAISER:

So for Ben, a real tube ripper was one that somehow people wanted to rip out of the tube so fast 'cause they couldn't wait to get their hands on the story. Now, it didn't make sense literally 'cause you didn't know what was there until you opened it up. But it was—this was a category for Ben. It was—it meant an unexpected story, a surprise, a laugh, a jolt, a "Holy shit" kind of reaction—but that's what he wanted. He wanted to be unpredictable, surprising and impactful. Impact was—was the byword. Impact was what he said he wanted the paper to have from the beginning. And it was—and Watergate was the great moment when finally that—that impact arrived in spades.

Ben Bradlee's inner circle

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ROBERT KAISER:

I was overseas when this building was planned and designed. It's a wonderful Katharine Graham story. She hired IM Pei to design a building, and construction was about to begin at great expense. And several people on her

business side came to her and said, "Katharine, this is a beautiful building, but it's not gonna work. There's a ton of room for the printing presses. This is wrong. That's wrong." And at the last minute she had to cancel the contract. Big scandal—and—I think an expensive one too. And they hired an engineer to design a completely functional building instead, hurriedly. And Ben got involved in this, I understand. I wasn't there. But he had this idea that he wanted an office in literally the middle of the newsroom on the edge, but with a great big picture window, so that everybody could see what he was doing all the time.

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ROBERT KAISER:

He thought this was a smart reflection of his general management ethos, which was, you know, like Woodrow Wilson. "Open covenants openly arrived at." He didn't wanna have anybody thinking there was a lot of secrecy going on. Didn't work in a way because one of Ben's weaknesses—was—that he played favorites. He—had the people that he loved and relied on, and they knew a lot more about what he was thinking and doing than the other people. For those of us, and I'm happy to—and pleased to be able to say I was one of them, those who were the favorites were just thrilled to be so. They just—you knew you were in-- you know, a blessed circle, that it was—there was this aura radiating and you were part of it. It was thrilling. Those who were left out—bitterly resented it and resented us.

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ROBERT KAISER:

It took me years to realize this. We had a very good example. I hope you will talk to, who was Ben's successor, my—dear friend Len Downie, who was a

brilliant editor in a completely different way, very successful. But he resented Cohen and me enormously and then others because we were invited to have dinner with Ben and Sally, and he was not. And he was a bumpkin from Ohio State. He didn't count. He didn't score. And that was an interesting phenomenon. And Ben, ultimately, I think late in life, realized that had been a mistake. But he was—he was pretty—pretty selfish in—in an understandable way always about maximizing his own comfort level. He did not like situations where he was uncomfortable. So interestingly the great ferocious Ben Bradlee, famous for running a very competitive newsroom and making people compete with each other on the staff and so on actually hated confrontations.

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ROBERT KAISER:

I had to fire one reporter once who was a friend of Bradlee's, and he actually dropped in on me after we did it. It was—I won't tell the story 'cause it's too scandalous. But he dropped in on me afterwards and said, "How did you do that? I could never have done that?" And—and the guy—the guy completely let us down in a crisis. It was remarkably easy to do it. But it was– that was typical of Ben. He—he didn't fire anybody that he couldn't avoid firing for a long time. But this—this idea of having a comfortable group of people that made him laugh was very important to him. And he stuck to it. But his judgment wasn't bad. He missed some very good people from this circle, Downie was a good example. But the people he chose were, I think, by and large, self-serving to say it, but I think they were the right people. They were deserving.

Ben Bradlee's commitment to the truth

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ROBERT KAISER:

The whole—the whole—vocabulary of accountability was actually something that Downie articulated very—very forcefully after Ben retired. But Ben practiced it. He certainly cared about it. And he wanted us to be exposing the fakers. I mean, Ben's great bete noire, I think from the early stage of his career, was public officials who lied. And you've seen this. There are lots of examples of his concern. He gave a number of speeches about lying. I hope you can find some for your film. But it really drove him crazy. And I think that was the-- the heart of his antipathy for Nixon. He understood, among all of his other failings, that Richard Nixon was a world-class liar. And it just drove him nuts. And he wanted to expose it. So this—this kind of—finding the fakers and exposing them impulse was very, very important to Ben.

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ROBERT KAISER:

But he also loved the idea that we would explain what was really going on. There was the superficial version, and then, there's what's really going on. And he always pushed for that and cared about it. We developed, in Ben's time—the—art form which we called the tick tock, which was going back on a big event right after it happened and going to interview key players in a big decision, a big current and—to find out how they decided to do what they did, what happened. It was un-reportable as it was happening, but right afterwards became much more possible to report. That was a real—Bradlee contribution, I think. Stern, who I mentioned was a great lover of the tick tock—and we did a lot of them—a lot of them.

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ROBERT KAISER:

Three Mile Island was a great example of a story that Stern got very involved in, emotionally involved. I don't know why. But Ben loved the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster, and we—we—we led the world in that story. We were really first on—many aspects of it. And that was a good example of something he just decided he wanted to know about. He was somewhat unpredictable in that way. If you had told me that-- that a nuclear power plant accident would have become a topic A for Ben Bradlee before it did, I would have, I think, been skeptical. But he's done a lot. He seized on things that he loved.

Bradlee's devotion to good storytelling

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ROBERT KAISER:

He wanted—and he—the early decisions he made that really mattered, I think included sending a remarkable odd duck called Nicholas von Hoffman who had been a star reporter for *The Chicago Daily News*, hired Nick, and sent him down South to write—very personally about the Civil Rights events. And I—I was not a party to—to Ben's conversations with Nick. I was a young metro reporter when this happened. But-- somehow, he emboldened von Hoffman to write stories that were opinionated, and personal, and violated all the traditional rules. And they were really compelling and powerful. They really put people on the ground in Mississippi and Louisiana in these ugly situations that were—very powerful stuff. And that—the word went out that this is what Ben wants.

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ROBERT KAISER:

And—it spawned a lot of imitators, some of whom were not up to the job, but—it was powerful stuff. It was effective. And Richard Harwood was another great writer, hired from *The Louisville Courier Journal*, who loved to tell stories, and Ben gave him great encouragement to do so. And Ward Just also got the same brief. There were a number of people. So—and the other thing-- but he always cared about was presidential politics, metro politics. He decided and hiring Broder was a manifestation of this, that he wanted this paper to be the best in politics. And it was—it was for 30-40 years. Still is, I believe.

The style section

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ROBERT KAISER:

This was a function of Ben's *Newsweek* experience, certainly. He said when he came to *The Post*, "There's no reason that—the good writing, the good storytelling should appear in *Time* and *Newsweek* and not in *The Washington Post*. There's nothing they do that we can't do here and do better 'cause we have more space. We have more freedom to operate. So let's do it." And I think that was the instinct that led to the idea of—what amounted to a back of the book for the *Washington Post*. The back of the book at *Newsweek* was what they called all the soft sections. It was—the—cultural reviews, the personalities—and so on. The—and he said, "Let's do that—here at *The Post*." And he launched this very interesting group of very odd ducks—and none of them, sadly, are alive to share this story with you.

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ROBERT KAISER:

But—they brainstormed and created this idea of a section based on features, which would include cultural news and reviews. They started from a very low point. *The Post* critics at this time weren't very good. *The Post* feature writers at the time weren't very good. So the whole thing had to be created. But it was. It was pulled off. Took a long time. And this is where Sally is an important figure. Sally—emboldened by Ben, clearly—decided to write outrageously about public figures and embarrassingly, in a way that the whole town talked about. It was a big deal, and it was her—her moment—what made her. But that made the style section too, I think.

Ben Bradlee's friendship with JFK

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ROBERT KAISER:

My favorite line of Ben's was from *Conversations with Kennedy*, which is an interesting book, a little embarrassing 'cause it reveals that, for a reporter covering the guy, Ben did get too close to him. And he knew it. And he really wanted to confess it. But being Ben, he wanted to confess it in a way that was utterly charming and not painful or embarrassing. So—and that's what he did in that book, I think. But he has a line there, which says, ultimately, "If I was ahead, so be it." Which is wise, because what Ben understood, in retrospect, was that his whole mystique, his whole fabulous story was made possible by his relationship with JFK, which he came to realize, finally to journalistic ethics, in this—pretty fundamental way.

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ROBERT KAISER:

Now, in the wonderful way that I—most people have, I think, Ben was always able to forgive himself because he could say, accurately, "Well, that was me, and I'm a good guy. I wasn't corrupted, so it was okay, really." But part of him knew that it really wasn't. He got too close. He went too far. But he loved it because, you know, the—I believe this. JFK had the same effect on Joe Alsop and Marcus Childs and Ben Bradlee and Scotty Reston and a lot of other Washington reporters that Ben Bradlee had on us. He was the same kind of sexually charismatic dramatic figure. And Ben fell for him just the way I fell for Ben, I think. I really do. And—that was—that was an important part of the story. So it went too far, okay, I'm sorry.

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ROBERT KAISER:

Ben was saved from the worst potential consequences of his being too close to Kennedy by Kennedy's assassination, which kind of ended the problem. Devastated Ben, just devastated him. But it solved the problem. Nobody is more important to *The Washington Post*—than the president. The president is the focus of professional intention of this great institution. And to be compromised by a personal friendship with that person—even if it doesn't affect, in some very tangible way, the way the paper covers the Kennedys or the—George—John Kennedy—it certainly colored the attitudes of everybody in Washington who knew because everybody did know about Ben's friendship with JFK. So that it was—there was a presumption of guilt, in a way, which tainted the paper, whether or not you could point to a particular story or pattern of coverage or whatever which, you could say, that shows--that proves it. Bradlee's in the tank for Kennedy.

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ROBERT KAISER:

The—the problem is—it is the basic issue of journalistic ethics. It is that you've got to be purer than the pope—because you claim implicitly—as a journalist in Washington, you claim an authority based on the proposition that you are totally independent, that no one owns you, that you are bolted to no one. FDR had a lot of pals, but no peers. I think JFK thought of Ben—they're the same age. They were the same—from the same world, although certainly different sides of the tracks initially. They both went to Harvard. They both fought in the war. They—et cetera, et cetera. They were--they were very, like—peas in a pod.

Journalism surrounding the Vietnam War

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ROBERT KAISER:

That was a mistake. That was—I mean, Ben erred in that matter, certainly. But he was in a really difficult position. And that was not —based on his having picked the wrong friend. It was based on his sister in law having married the wrong guy and so on. I don't—you know, there were—because of the discoveries of JFK's personal transgressions, which Ben, interestingly, always insisted he knew nothing about, which many people, including his close friends could never believe. It was interesting. He'd say it again and again, "I never knew." And—I can't remember who. Was Williams a skeptic about that? I can't remember. But there were plenty of people, including Howard Simons—Ben's managing editor for a long time, who just said, "I can't believe it. He's just covering it up." I just—I—I did believe it having heard it so many times.

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ROBERT KAISER:

I'm not sure why, except that Ben hated lying, and—why lie about it? There's —nothing gained by—I mean, he looked like a dope. He – you were so close to this guy who was madly fornicating all the time, and you claim not to have known anything about it, it makes you look sort of dumb. You were a reporter after all. And—and he understood that. He did. He didn't have an answer to that. But nobody was reporting on philandering. That's the point. This—you know, it took the war in Vietnam—a profound event in our history to change everything, including this. Until the war in Vietnam, the natural instinct in Washington, including among senior journalists, was to trust the government. It's hard to bring that back now. It's hard to imagine how powerful that was. But there was—that was the instinct of the country. There are polling figures which confirm it.

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ROBERT KAISER:

Two-thirds of Americans in 1967 said to Gallup, when asked, "In a crisis, when action has to be taken suddenly, do you expect your government will do the right thing?" Two-thirds said, "Yes, do the right thing." Today, the answer is 20% or 18% or something. It's a profound change. And that—that last—that loss of confidence in American institutions—which I think is the hallmark of our time was-- was what made the—rules change and made us willing to write about politicians, peccadilloes in a way we never did. And it was amazing what—George Smathers and John Kennedy—Smathers, a senator from Florida, ran a kind of procurement service for young senators,

we now know, but—you know, never had that part read about. Nobody knew. Different world.

Ben Bradlee's relationship with Kay Graham

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ROBERT KAISER:

You know, there's a wonderful set of documents. I wonder if you could find several of these. They wrote each other a love note every Christmas. They both quoted them somewhere with – I've read all of them. They're really quite remarkable. And I guess Kay authorized me when I was working on the obit to read them. But it was—an asexual love affair. And it was—but it did have, like all love affairs, a very important psychological component. And I think what you just said is—is the heart of it. If you read Katharine Graham's memoirs and think about what they tell us. For example, that her parents moved to Washington when she was a toddler, leaving her in the care of nannies until she was more than three years old.

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ROBERT KAISER:

In other words, in this absolutely critical phase of a child's development, her parents had taken a powder and left her and her siblings on their own in Mount Kisco. This was a woman with a profound insecurity, which was well beyond the reach of any shrink—or any conventional solution. I mean, she just was never really gonna believe in herself. And Ben—I mean, one of Ben's great gifts was his ability to read the psychology of a person who he was dealing with. And—and it was almost everybody around him. He had a very good take, in my experience, on everybody. When we had a reporter who

worked for me when I was the national editor, for example, who was causing trouble, and I'd go to Ben, and say, "What can I do about this?" He would say, "Well, here's the—here's the thing about that person."

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ROBERT KAISER:

And—he had it. It was quite remarkable. But he read Katharine from the beginning. And the—and the beginning, in an important way, was the famous lunch at the F Street Club where he said, "I'd give my left one for a chance to be managing editor of *The Post*." Somehow he knew that that—not just the idea, but the choice of language was going to appeal to her. He understood her frustrations as a woman, somehow. It was brilliant, I think. But that-- that lunch got this relationship off on the right foot. And it never changed. It never changed. It was—and he has a phrase for this which he called the care and feeding of Grahams. He—he would tease us. "Have we paid enough attention to the care and feeding of Grahams," which really meant, "Have we warned Kay and later Don about this story that's about to appear that's gonna make people scared or angry or upset?"

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ROBERT KAISER:

They have to know before it's in the paper that it's coming. This was—one of his many good instincts. And he was really good at it, much better than I think any of us understood. That's what my—take from reading these love letters, these Christmas notes that they wrote to each other is that – he was assiduous, not—in an off-putting way. It didn't—it didn't make me uncomfortable to read this stuff. He was doing exactly the right thing. Here was a woman who had inherited this property, who had allowed him to

convince her to transform it from a second-rate provincial rag into one of the great publications of the world, had put up a lot of money and a lot of patience and a lot of courage to support him in doing it. And he felt that she deserved every favor and kindness he could do for her. And he—and—I believe that was—an accurate, wise assessment.

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ROBERT KAISER:

And he did—govern his behavior. And it really mattered. And the result was that they never, ever broke the rules. And Ben set the rules. And the basic rule was, "Stay out of my business. Tell me if you don't like something. Tell me if you're upset or worried or whatever. But don't tell me what to do, who to hire, who to fire, what to put on the front page. That's not your job." And—people like me, when I became the managing editor and started circulating in public and would tell people and—at the dinner table, Katharine Graham or Donald Graham has never called me or come to see me with an instruction about a story, how to write it, where to play it, or to kill it or anything of that kind. It has never happened. Never. And people would look at you like you were smoking something, just wouldn't believe it. But it was true. And that was the essence of Ben's deal with Kay—and they preserved it. It lasted.

How the Pentagon Papers changed the *Post*

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ROBERT KAISER:

The Pentagon Papers begins, that story, as a huge embarrassment for *The Post* because the *New York Times* splashes this big story on a Sunday, which

they'd spent months—literally months preparing. It turned out they'd done a really bad job. They—they wrote stories that were almost incomprehensible. I urge you to look at them. They're really interesting. They—they were—they got lost in the trees, and the forest disappeared. It was an interesting phenomenon. But—the initial Pentagon Papers story is—*New York Times* has a big scoop. *Washington Post* has bupkis, nothing. And—Ben hated it, of course. Hated it as much as he could. But then, the administration moves in, gets a court order, cease and desist for the *New York Times*.

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ROBERT KAISER:

And this weird guy, who was then the national editor of the *Post*, Ben Bagdikian gets a call. Daniel Ellsberg knows Ben Bagdikian and calls him and says, "I've got something for you. Bagdikian knew exactly what it was. I forgot where he flew off somewhere and collected the Papers. And interestingly, two old coots on the *Post*, Chalmers Roberts and Murrey Marder who had been writing about the war—from the beginning and—were very self-confident senior reporters—with the help of a great Pentagon reporter, George Wilson, the three of them produced a few stories very quickly, which were actually better journalism, I thought, than the initial *Times* stories. But the great thing was, thanks to them, we were in the game. So then—the court order comes and was extended to us. And it comes at this absolutely critical moment for Katharine Graham because she is, unfortunately as it turns out, taking the *Washington Post* public at precisely this moment.

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ROBERT KAISER:

The initial public offering is ten days away or something very imminent. And—everybody's terrified that—Nixon is going to somehow screw this up. And the business—people at *The Post* all agreed, "We can't—we can't aggravate our problem here. We can't do this." But Fritz Beebe, the very interesting fancy New York lawyer who Phil Graham had hired to come to *Post* and be the kind of elder statesman, the wise man running the business—and Kay had the sense and the courage to realize, pushed by Ben on the telephone and the famous phone call when they were yelling at Kay, "We've gotta do this. We've gotta publish," she realized that Ben was—she couldn't keep Ben and keep him happy if she didn't agree to do this.

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ROBERT KAISER:

So she did. And a turning point—big turning point for everybody. It meant we had the balls to stand up to the government and say, "Nonsense." And Ben loved it. There's a wonderful picture of Ben and Kay leaving the courthouse, which you can—use the day the decision was rendered in our favor in which Ben's making a wonderful Bradlee-esque victory gesture. And it's captured beautifully, the spirit of the moment.

The lasting impact of the Pentagon Papers

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ROBERT KAISER:

This was the first known case of the government seeking and the federal court granting prior restraint stopping publication of a story before it happened. This was utterly without precedent and quite terrifying. This—episode created a reflex—a courageous reflex in the institution—to do

the right thing in a pinch—even against the president, which was the—it was the first time that reflex had been used. Well, maybe not the first. *The Post* had called out Lyndon Johnson on Vietnam. Murrey Marder, state department reporter—coined the phrase "credibility gap" to describe Johnson's problem, having told so many lies about Vietnam that nobody believed him anymore. And it was turned by the great Larry Stern into a front page headline—and it immediately caught on so that—everybody in Washington suddenly was writing and saying "LBJ has a credibility gap, i.e. that means he's a liar." And that was—that was a big breakthrough just psychologically—for everybody in the system to do that, to say the president is lying. That was hard.

The distrust surrounding Nixon

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ROBERT KAISER:

Ben was a lot older than I, but I shared this, which went right back-- I was six years old in 1949, but I lived in a very political family. My father worked in the Truman administration. And I was taught at the dinner table in 1949 that this man accusing Helen Gahagan Douglas of being a parlor pink in the race for Congress in California was a vile person, and that was Dick Nixon. There was—there was a category of Washington characters that understood from the—earliest days of his career that Nixon was a slime ball and—you had to watch out for Dick Nixon. And then, Ben certainly caught on early too, for sure.

Ben Bradlee's lasting legacy

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ROBERT KAISER:

Ben will rightly be remembered for his absolutely heroic role in the Watergate story and for his role in the Pentagon Papers—for the great journalism that he personally was involved in and encouraged. But it's my fervent hope that the world will remember Ben not just for those things, but for a very profound contribution to the life of the United States of America, which was the creation, in Washington, of a great, vibrant, utterly independent institution called *The Washington Post*. It existed before he came and it has existed after he's gone. But the thing we think of, the thing that the world knows as one of the great courageous newspapers, that's Ben Bradlee's creation, and that was his biggest contribution, in my view, and what we should revere and remember him for.

Reporting on the Watergate scandal

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ROBERT KAISER:

The essence of Watergate was covering up from the beginning. And nothing appealed to Ben more than ripping off the cover, right. That's—that was the game. He just loved it. So as Carl and Bob, in their wonderful reporting, came to realize just how elaborate and extensive the scheming and the covering up was, I think this just whetted Ben's appetite. He just—every new revelation made him hungry for the next one. Now, I was in Moscow—in a completely different world, although I was following it closely, it was such a compelling story. But I had to wait sometimes ten days or two weeks for my copy of *The Washington Post* to clear the Soviet post office so I could read the stories. But it was—I mean, there's no question that this story was designed by—the god

of journalism to appeal to Benjamin C. Bradlee. It just had everything but sex that would have appealed to him. I mean, it was just so fabulous.

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ROBERT KAISER:
I think that was—I'm sorry that I never had a conversation with Ben during this period. I talked to him about it afterwards quite a lot. His biggest concern after the fact—was Katharine. He was—how this would affect her. Would—would she hold up? And, you know, it became very personal. You remember—the famous John Mitchell quote, told Katie Graham, "She's got her tits caught in a wringer." That was—that—you know, it was a juicy quote for the newspaper, but it was a painful thing for the Grahams and Ben, I think, to realize how personal this had become. And it was an important fact that the well-being of the company and the grad family depended on businesses that were licensed by the federal government, five or six television stations that at this time were the largest single source of profit in the Washington Post Company.

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ROBERT KAISER:
So they were always afraid—and with reason and we know Nixon did look into seeing if they could somehow lift those licenses. So it was—it was real. It was a fight. It's an astounding fact. And it's—it will haunt Nixon forever. I've—I have recent times, I've read some more about Nixon, and there's just—you can't escape. He's left the record in those tapes from which he will never escape, mercifully. He's doomed in history, as, incidentally, is his sidekick, Mister Kissinger.

How *All the President's Men* affected Ben Bradlee

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ROBERT KAISER:

It—it affected him less than it affected his situation and his colleagues—I think. But I can't—I'm not sure how much it affected him. He loved it. He loved the glittery life. And this is an important part of the story, which I can't really tell, but Sally loved it too, and she exploited it. And the life that they built on Long Island was Sally's doing. And Ben just got a great kick out of it, to discover that all of these celebrities considered him one of them. He just thought that was a kick, you know. He loved it. But it didn't go to his head—I never felt. It never made him feel differently about who and what he really was, I don't think. But in the paper it had a big effect.

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ROBERT KAISER:

Two senior editors, who were both deeply involved in Watergate, they're both dead, Howard Simons, the managing editor who is in the movie, barely, and Philip Jalen, the editor of the editorial page, whose crusading editorials about Watergate were an important part of the—of the story. They both were bitterly resentful of Ben's fame and fortune as a result of the movie. And there was nothing you could do about it. You could—nobody could say, as Kay did, "Oh, don't worry. It's just a movie. It's no big…" 'cause they understood correctly. This is what the world would remember. And they weren't there. Just hard—hard. But—and, you know—nothing was the same after that movie came out. I mean, it was—we all lived in a different planet because we were all famous now, in a new way.

Ben Bradlee was self-aware of his persona

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ROBERT KAISER:

I mean, he loved the fact that a new reporter on the paper would bring his mother and father into the newsroom and try to figure out a way to get them to meet Ben Bradlee, you know. This was—it was a big deal. And he—he loved the part. He played it well. But he was very conscious, I think, that he'd become something quite different. And he loved Robards, interestingly. There was a real friendship. We all joked that Robards was a pretty good Bradlee, almost as good as the real thing. But—that was just true. He wasn't as good—just—his projection of the persona. But he was damned good, and they became pals over it. It was funny.

Janet Cooke and the story that never happened

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ROBERT KAISER:

Janet Cooke was a pretty, poised—interesting young Black woman who got a job at *The Post*, and it turned out—was a completely fraudulent figure who had lied about her whole biography and made up a whole life story that was a concoction. But she figured out the—the ethos—Ben's newsroom was admirable talent really. And I—I don't know how it began, this search for this eight-year-old heroin addict. But there was—I think there was a real rumor of a kid addict. And-- and she was assigned to pin it down and see what she could find out. And that's how it all began.

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ROBERT KAISER:

I remember the story vividly. I said, "Courtland—could this be true?" And his eye—his eyebrows went through the roof. That's how I discovered that there was a whole kind of dissident movement among the Black journalists on the paper who didn't trust her and didn't trust this story, and had tried to convince Woodward and other editors that there was something fishy. And that failed. I don't think Ben ever understood before the thing broke—how strongly that had been—it had been—it had been kept from him. And it was an interesting undermining reputation of the ethos that led to the picture window that there were no—you know, everything was open. Anybody could come in. In fact, people were intimidated. They were—and the more so after he became such a big mythological figure, as you put it. So people didn't come in.

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ROBERT KAISER:

People were shy to come in, to bear bad news, particularly, I think. Anyway, the actual denouement of the crisis is one of Ben's greatest moments. He-- just as never got hung up on his own failings, he never failed to confront a crisis when he knew he had to. And he knew he had to. And he and—the brilliant young David Maraniss, who was one of the editors on the story, stayed up all hours with Janet making her confess, ultimately. It must have been a real third-degree interrogation. There were no cameras in the room—but she finally totally collapsed and confessed everything—about which Ben felt weirdly very good because he knew he made the worst mistake in his career and—and at least he felt-- could feel that he had done—made also one of the greatest accomplishments—by getting her to come clean.

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ROBERT KAISER:

And that was big. And then, he did the very smart thing of asking his ombudsman at the time, Bill Green—to really find out what happened and write the whole story—whatever it was. And Ben knew, by that time, that he didn't know everything. He didn't know fully how much had been kept from him, which ultimately Bill Green told him in that story. It was a horrible time, but it was a great recovery. There's an old saying in the newspaper business that a story is too good to check, and it's sort of a joke. But this is an example of a story that was too good to check. But interestingly, you know, one of the—one the most important moments—for me in that whole episode was the-- all the reporters who covered the city government rushed towards distinguished mayor for life, Marion S. Barry, Junior and said, "Mister Mayor, Mister Mayor, how 'bout this?" "Oh," he said. "I've heard about that kid. It's a great tragedy. We're trying to find him."

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ROBERT KAISER:

So—and he confirmed it, you know, in a weird way. When—it wasn't true. It wasn't. The kid didn't exist. So anyway, he—it was just the worst, the worst. But it was—a tube ripper. It was—and it was, you know. It won the Pulitzer Prize. Everybody talked about it. It was topic A for weeks. It was just exactly what Ben thought he wanted in *The Washington Post.*

The aftermath of the Janet Cooke incident

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ROBERT KAISER:

It was his worst moment, and it coincided, painfully, with the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. And Ben had to appear on a panel before all of his peers as this thing was happening. It was just the worst for him. He hated it. Well we did – we felt awful for him. It's true. When the—Courtland Milloy and—Milton Coleman and one other Black journalist came forward and said that they had expressed anxiety or concern about the story. Well, then we all realized that there'd been too much complementation somehow. That was—that was a bad moment. But we all felt this terrible feeling for Ben that—he had suffered this horrible humiliation and there was an instinct among me and all of us who loved him to rally around—and Cohen reminds me of this story we—a group of us said, "Let's go have a drink."

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ROBERT KAISER:

And I had a house very close to *The Post* in DuPont Circle, the closest house. And—a bunch of us—adjourned to my house to have a stiff drink. And we all—the mission was to make Ben feel better. But we all felt so bad. In a classic way and within a few minutes, it was role reversal; Ben was making us feel better. He was fine. He—he never got thrown off his—his gyroscope. His equilibrium, I never saw it challenged. He never faced a problem or a moment when he couldn't cope, that I saw. It was an amazing talent.

Watergate and Ben Bradlee's lasting legacy

01:00:20:00

ROBERT KAISER:

This ethos was something Ben grew up with but really didn't aggressively pursue in the first ten or 15 years of his journalistic career. It was a different

world, as we've discussed, before Vietnam and before the '60s. And when did Ben discover how important—the free press was? I suspect it was Watergate, the realization that his paper had the power to do what it did to Nixon. Not by itself, of course. That's an important footnote. Lots of people, at the time and afterwards, said, "Oh, *The Washington Post* brought down Richard Nixon." No, it didn't. *The Washington Post* made it possible for Sam Ervin and Peter Rodino and Barry Goldwater ultimately to bring down Richard Nixon.

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ROBERT KAISER:

But *The Post* did not have the power to do it. And that's an important distinction and should be understood. If you don't have the power to send people to jail or the power to subpoena them to give sworn testimony, you don't have the power to destroy a public figure. So we didn't destroy Richard Nixon. But without Bob and Carl's work—Sam Ervin would never have existed. That committee would not have been convened and so on. So it was symbiotic—and they depended on each other. But—your question is a very good one that I can't really answer. The—the hatred of lying was in Ben's DNA from an early age. But—the crusading belief in the First Amendment and the critical importance of the independence of the newspapers—the news media, I'm not sure when that took hold.

The importance of independent reporting

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ROBERT KAISER:

Ben used to like to talk about this because he became aware, in the '60s and the '70s, of how compromised the journalism of the '40s and '50s had been

that—reporters did not profoundly believe in their own independence, that they relied much too much on the government to provide the information that they wrote about, that independent—truly independent reporting was much too rare and unusual. And that—he came to understand that over time—as we all did. And it was—that was the lesson of our time really that we were the only ones who were gonna do some of these things. There was nobody else. Either we did them or they didn't happen. It's still the case. Sort of scary. But it's a fact.

How Ben Bradlee would have viewed the Trump presidency

01:03:47:00

ROBERT KAISER:

Donald Trump is such an obvious Ben Bradlee target in so many ways. You Know, full of baloney. Full of himself. Psychologically so transparent and—he was a natural for Ben, but—Ben would have been appalled that this could have happened. You know, I think he would have been very upset with all of us for doing a bad job as we did of seeing it coming, of understanding—I mean, I—now say and feel that my insightful wisdom about the importance of Vietnam and its impact on the erosion of trust in Washington and in government is at the heart of the Trump story. But I didn't understand that last year. I just missed it. I did not realize how much anger there was, or how deep it was, or how immune it was to what I thought of as the conventional rules of the game.

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ROBERT KAISER:

And the thing that would have amazed Ben the most, I think, is what amazes me the most, which is that a guy running for president could be captured on videotape talking about how much fun it is to grab women by the pussy and get away with it and still win the election. I mean, how does that happen? Ben Bradlee would love to know the answer to that question and so would I.

Ben Bradlee had a demanding method

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ROBERT KAISER:

We all know people like this—Donald Trump is another one, who live viscerally, who have a lot of confidence in their own intuitive gut reactions. And who absorb a lot of what they learn verbally. Ben read the papers. He read a few books, not a lot of books. But his method was quick—quick study always. And his—his patience for really getting to the bottom of a complicated story was limited. I remember vividly—one of my favorite compliments from Ben. I was assigned by Stern, I think, to figure out how big a crook was Bert Lance. Bert Lance was the little small-time Georgia banker who Jimmy Carter brought to Washington to run the Office of Management and Budget.

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ROBERT KAISER:

And it turned out the bank—examiners discovered after he was in Washington that he had been running the—the bank that he had—actually his wife's family owned it, like a—personal piggy bank. He broke every regulation and rule in the banking business. It was a completely rogue operation, and he got caught, and hearings were called. And there were these

series of bad deals that—he got involved in. It was extremely complicated. And I was young and eager and covering the Senate at the time. And it fell to me to read everything and become the in-house guy who knew what Bert Lance did with that deal with Mister Smith in January of 19—And I did. And—we had a great time with the story. It lasted a few weeks. And when it was over, Ben came over to me one day and said, "Jesus, how did you ever figure all that stuff out? That was so complicated."

01:07:35:00

ROBERT KAISER:

And—that was a Bradlee compliment. And—it was a reflection of the difference between him and me. I was—that was the kind of reporter I was. I loved doing that. When I was the editor in charge of Iran-Contra coverage, I did it all over again, trying to master all those details. And Ben just would never do that. It wasn't—in his bag of tricks. He wasn't—he always knew that he needed somebody to do it, and he was very good at picking the right people. But he never pretended to do it himself or thought he could, I don't think. It just wasn't his thing.

Ben Bradlee chose his words carefully

01:08:21:00

ROBERT KAISER:

I'm not going to be able to remember the phraseology, but the—talent came right out of the Navy. He learned this stuff in the Pacific and World War II. And he realized at some point soon afterwards that it was fun because it identified him as different than those guys he went to Harvard with who would never talk like that, who would never say fuck. And he loved to say

fuck and so on. But it was—it was Ensign Bradlee speaking. And he—just—he loved the impression that it made. He taught Kay to talk this way. And it was always hilarious to hear her say something off color that-- it was an act on her part. But she did it pretty well. And it was all because of him.

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