
Mark Hatfield: Oregon's Republican Dove — *Ralph Friedman*

FRONTIER

March 1966, 35 Cents

The Press and the Assassination

GLADWIN HILL

Travel Foyer

The Press and the Assassination:
Dispelling Some Illusions

By GLADWIN HILL

THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION AND THE AMERICAN PUBLIC. Compiled and edited by Bradley S. Greenberg and Edwin B. Parker. Stanford University Press. 392 pp. \$8.95.

EVERYONE often thinks he could do the other fellow's job better than the other fellow is doing it—that superior operation of a restaurant, a garment factory or a college should be duck soup.

The month of November, 1963, touched off a continuing spate of this foolishness in respect to the news business, commonly known as the press. In a fantastic spasm of history, the President of the United States had been slain, and his assassin dispatched forty-eight hours later. The agencies mainly responsible for the President's safety on the occasion, the Secret Service and the FBI, somehow managed to fast-talk themselves out of much blame. A stricken public in due course absorbed its grief. But to a less resilient stratum of intelligentia, the illogic of the tragedy was unbearable: the venting of emotion called for a whipping-boy. It being difficult to alter the events themselves, wrathful second-guessing was turned onto the news coverage of the events.

Significantly, no one has been able to allege what would have been the press's worst possible dereliction under the circumstances: that the public was insufficiently informed. Failing this, the carpers had to twang on a more baroque contention: that the public was told too much.

Most of this criticism, including that voiced by the Warren Commission, has been demonstrably specious.

Gladwin Hill, chief of the Los Angeles bureau of the New York Times, covered the events at Dallas after the assassination. He was present when Lee Harvey Oswald was killed at the Dallas police headquarters.

The case for the press was fairly well summarized by a study committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, which reported: "Within forty-eight hours, the print and electronic media reported the Dallas story so accurately and completely that the Warren Commission, in ten months and with unlimited resources, did not alter the basic outlines of what the media had reported."

This is now substantiated by the most exhaustive sociological study ever made of the impact of a major event on the public. In *The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public*, some twenty different approaches to the subject by a number of institutions and individual researchers have been compiled and edited by Bradley S. Greenberg of Michigan State University and Edwin B. Parker of Stanford. The individual studies ranged from the channels through which people learned of the Dallas events, to their emotional and physical impact on individuals of selected categories, such as college students and children.

By the time President Kennedy was dead, researchers established, 68 percent of the American public had learned of the shooting, and five and a half hours later the information reached 99.8 percent—a phenomenon, in view of public-opinion experts' tenet that normally no more than 80 percent of the public ever becomes aware of a given event or personality.

It is hard to see how, with the nation's fate possibly in the balance—with its President, perhaps the victim of a national or international revolutionary plot, the continuity of government and national defense momentarily uncertain, and circumstances conceivably calling for citizens to defend themselves—any shred of information could have been superfluous.

But long after the fact, long after

the dusts of uncertainty had settled, long after it was established (by the press) that the events in Dallas were a historic fluke and that the nation's stability was not in jeopardy, then the legal lint-pickers went to work.

Chief Justice Warren—who in a presumed public emergency two decades before, as Attorney General and later Governor of California, had countenanced thousands of American citizens being stripped of their civil rights and herded into concentration camps—now, in the security of hindsight, implicitly rated the asserted civil rights of one murderous psychopath as having transcended, on the weekend of Nov. 22, 1963, the rights of all the American people to information bearing perhaps critically on their personal safety.

Asserting that the comprehensive press reports had impaired Lee Harvey Oswald's putative right to an "impartial jury," and suggesting that newsmen were partly responsible for Oswald's being shot by Jack Ruby (which is balderdash—this reviewer was there), the Warren Commission advanced the incredible contention that, regarding events following the assassination of their President, the American people were entitled to no more information than could be encompassed in a communique of approximately 100 words.

Here are the Commission's own words:

It was proper and desirable that the public know which agencies were participating in the investigation and the rate at which their work was progressing. The public was entitled to know that Lee Harvey Oswald had been apprehended and that the state had gathered sufficient evidence to arraign him for the murders of the President and Patrolman Tippit, and that he was being held pending action of the grand jury, that the investigation was continuing, and that

the law enforcement agencies had discovered no evidence which tended to show that any other person was involved in either slaying. . . .

Seven facts. *Regarding the most extraordinary and momentous event in the nation's recent history, the American people were expected by the Warren Commission to have been satisfied with fewer facts than they would read about a high-school basketball game.*

Neither the press nor the public [the Commission's sermon from Cloud 9 continued] had a right to be contemporaneously informed by the police or prosecuting authorities of the details of the evidence being accumulated against Oswald. . . . It is true that the public would not have been in a position to assess the adequacy of the investigation or to apply pressures for further official undertakings. . . .

(. . . But never mind that, the implication is—the national interest is secondary to conjectural sensitivities of one man in a jail cell. Yet amid all this pedantic zeal on behalf of the defendant, it is to be noted, one of the myriad facts evidently considered *not* "proper and desirable that the public should know" was Oswald's assertion that he was *innocent*—which the press in its alleged depravity reported as soon as it came from Oswald's lips in the Dallas police headquarters corridor.)

. . . But a major consequence of the hasty and at times inaccurate divulgence of evidence [the Commission continued] . . . was simply to give rise to rumors and public confusion.

(What "rumors"? What "confusion"? The book-length Commission report, which goes into infinitesimal detail on lesser matters, fails to cite any.)

Happily, if only for the sake of accurate historical perspective, the Stanford study emphatically contradicts this monstrous olympian hand-wringing.

Wilbur Schramm, Director of Stanford's Institute for Communications Research, says in the volume's introduction:

It was extremely important to a shocked public to have a large and continuing flow of information on the matter that concerned them. The swift, full coverage undoubtedly grounded many rumors before they could circulate. By speaking so fully and freely of Oswald and the events in which he was involved, the media helped to reduce fears of a conspiracy and prepare people to believe the theory that a lone, disturbed man had done it. . . . One of the most important deductions from the events of late November, 1963, is that Americans trust their free press and free broadcasting system. . . . It must be said that these did not fail the American people in any important way.

Nonetheless, a bemused congeries of jurists, lawyers and public officials (few of whom, on average, could deny having at some point in their careers fed self-serving information about pending trials to the press) have parroted the Warren contention that dissemination of details about Oswald's arrest, background and detention potentially inhibited the procurement of

"an impartial jury." The best that can be said of such fulminations is that they are foolishly unrealistic.

It is a juridical axiom that an impartial juror is a person who can put prejudices and uncorroborated impressions aside—not that utterly non-existent creature, an individual so detached from current affairs that he has a blank mind. Indeed, the contention that public knowledge of any more than a defendant's name, age, address, and perhaps occupation, fatally taints the minds of potential jurors is directly at odds with traditional legal concepts of fair trial. In the courtroom the premise is that jurors can be deluged with prejudicial pseudo-evidence and can be effectively instructed to disregard it. (In other words, the bandying of information about a defendant plainly is an activity the legal profession would like to monopolize rather than share with the public or its proxy, the press.)

Realistically, in most if not all cases, the fact of a person's arrest is calculated to generate an initial public impression of guilt—courtroom ground rules about presumption-of-innocence notwithstanding—in greater degree than collateral information. This impression stems quite logically from the fact that more guilty people are arrested than innocent ones. The more atrocious the crime, the greater is likely to be the public presumption of guilt—again on the logical premise that police are going to be more zealous and painstaking in apprehending a major offender than a minor one. Consequently, Lee Harvey Oswald's arrest for the most atrocious of crimes, coupled with the Warren-sanctioned information that "the state had gathered sufficient evidence to arraign him for the murders of the President and Patrolman Tippit," astronomically overshadowed any other details provided the public by the press in what was, fleetingly but no less really, a national emergency.

Indeed, if his arrest had only been reported on a stark name-rank-and-serial-number basis, it seems demonstrable that public presumption of his guilt would have been far *greater*: it was only on the basis of the additional published information that perfectly legitimate speculation and controversy about his possible innocence seethed in some quarters for months afterward.

The Stanford study, while not concerning itself directly with the matter



of Oswald's civil rights, encompasses this in its overall appraisal of the press's performance at Dallas. Says William L. Rivers, an Associate Professor of Communications at Stanford:

In the end, one must conclude that the press performed in its best tradition. The news of the assassination was made up almost entirely of authoritative reports. After all, reporters did not say that a bullet entered the President's throat; they quoted Drs. Malcolm Perry and Kemp Clark of the Parkland Memorial Hospital. The Dallas police first identified the rifle as a .30-calibre Enfield and a 7.65 Mauser. A Secret Service man said he thought the weapon was a .25-calibre Army or Japanese rifle. The housekeeper at the Oak Cliff rooming house said that Oswald had come dashing in about 12:45. And so on.

But the Stanford survey raises some pertinent questions.

The central question [Mr. Rivers continues] is whether the best tradition of the press is good enough. To blame a quoted authority is not a defense of the press but an explanation of two errors: the authority for making a mistake and the press's for publishing it. The lesson of Dallas is actually an old one in responsible journalism: reporting is not democratic to the point that everything posing as fact has equal status. . . . One must ask whether the press was too eager to satisfy the hunger for detail and beat the competition.

One major aspect of communication [Editors Greenberg and Parker add] to which not enough attention has been paid is the process by which the mass media make decisions about selecting and handling news. . . . What criteria do newsmen use in selecting material to report? The obvious competitive pressure to report as facts certain statements whose accuracy has not been checked, as in the reports about the make of the rifle Oswald used, could also stand some study. What kinds of statements, given by what kinds of people in what kinds of situations, do newsmen consider newsworthy in themselves, regardless of their validity? . . . How accurate are newsmen's perceptions of their audience?

Such questions, even in their seeming aspects of naiveté, are constructive in highlighting a critical factor in all the current pother about the press, "fair trial" and the many ramifications thereof. This factor is unfamiliarity by students of the press with nuts-and-bolts technics and dynamics of news coverage—the age-old mat-

ter of second-guessing the other fellow's operation of his business.

The most fundamental fact of journalism is that it is *journalism*—information geared to cycles of a single day and to the hours thereof. A news story or broadcast is not a book, a monograph, a legal brief nor even a magazine article. It is short-order history.

Racing the Clock

Laymen, although they expect their newspaper to be on the doorstep every morning and their radio or television news reporter to chime in on the appointed second, are chronically unable to comprehend the time pressures involved in producing these results. Ask a college professor to write a 1,000-word treatise and he will say gladly—in a week, two weeks, a month. In the news business it is a standard exigency to have to assemble, select, arrange and indite the material of a 1,000-word article *in the time it takes to type it*; one hour would be par for such an operation—*several hundred times faster* than the one-month schedule available to a college professor or to a lawyer writing a brief.

This is the pattern that public demand has evolved and that circumstances of modern life dictate, for better or for worse; nobody wants to wait till noon to find out what AT&T sold for at 10 a.m. In asking for short-order history, the public underwrites an implicit compromise: the completeness of information, the ruminations and judgments open to the scholar, simply are not humanly and mechanically possible when you are racing the clock.

No competent reporter trifles with accuracy, presents as unqualified fact

information about which there is a reasonable doubt, or cites as an authority someone whose competence is questionable without indicating that questionability.

But there are limitations inherent in the compromise of short-order history. There is not time to delve into the lifetime reliability of the farmer who saw the airplane crash: readers are supposed to infer that his account is no more nor less dependable than would be that of the average farmer. The statements of public officials must be assumed, barring arrant implausibility, to be competent. If they are not, that is a problem for the citizenry to rectify; it is not something the press can reform before press time.

(This is the essential fallacy of the Warren Commission's suggestion that informational problems manifested at Dallas—and blamed largely on the Dallas police—could be solved by the press concocting some sort of "code." There are upward of 15,000 police departments, and 15,000 community hierarchies of other public officials, throughout the country—each essentially responsible to its local citizenry, whose birthright is to prescribe the standards under which these hierarchies shall operate. Get 5,000 or more news organizations—newspapers, radio and television stations—trying to apply some sort of code in 15,000 situations and the only possible outcome is chaos and futility.)

Newspapers and news broadcasts are peppered with imprecisions and always will be, simply because it is not possible in hour-to-hour operation to do as thorough checking as it is in week-to-week, month-to-month, or year-to-year operation. If newspapers, radio and television waited to achieve textbook or affidavit precision in their material, there couldn't be newspa-

Now Open!

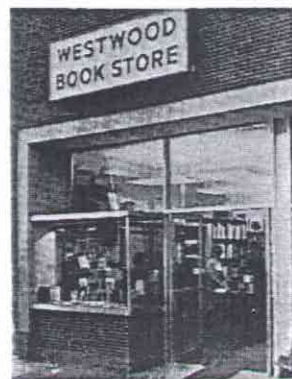
THE LOFT

(a new paperback department)

All major paperback lines

WESTWOOD BOOK STORE

1021 Broxton Ave., Los Angeles 90024 • GR 3-4923 or GR 3-4644



per, radio and television news. The remarkable thing is that most of the inaccuracies are insignificant—a man's age is given as 26 instead of 27, the plane crash is estimated at half a mile from the lake whereas it turns out to be a mile. The important objective is that readers not be substantially misinformed about a situation; the record of achievement of this objective is extraordinarily high.

As academic analysts tend to oversimplify some aspects of press operation, they tend to overcomplicate others. The "criteria newsmen use in selecting material to report" (quoting the Stanford inquiry) are essentially one: What would people be interested in—what would they want to know about? The crux of any reporter's job is anticipating the questions that would arise in a reasonable person's mind about the topic at hand, and adducing the answers. Once he has the answers, it is his job to relay them to his editors—all the information he has. It is *not* his job—as some non-journalists misconceive—to function as a judge, lawyer, sociologist or theologian in selecting what data he will relay. He may not have the qualifications to make such judgments, he probably does not have the time, and he certainly does not have the mandate. On a big event, such as the Dallas affair, one reporter may know only part of the story: he has no way of knowing how his material may relate to information from other sources. Screening material is the work of editors—and, again, it has to be done fast . . . and fallibly.

The "process by which the mass media make decisions about selecting and handling news" is not a science that can be blueprinted, but an art. Essentially it's the art of judging what people would be interested in, and classifying news stories as to degrees of interest *in the context of that day and that hour*, and in terms of fast-changing physical capabilities of presenting it. A story that might be worth a column in Tuesday's fleeting historical context might be worth only two inches on Wednesday—a circumstance that perpetually confounds tape-measuring analysts and gropers

for some scale of absolute values. These incessant variables are irritating to the scholar, but they are the inevitable result of human beings dealing with evanescent slices of history.

Of "competitive pressures" leading to journalistic aberrations there are many instances down the years, but Dallas was not one. It is virtually an axiom of journalism that the bigger the story, the less possibility there is for scoops or beats: with many newsmen on the scene, any development of consequence quickly becomes common knowledge. In the frenzy of the Dallas police headquarters, only a few reporters could get close enough to hear many official statements; they readily pooled the information with the others. Competition narrowed down largely to speed in transmission of reports, and this applied mainly to the two news agencies, the Associated Press and United Press International, and to the three television networks in a far more restricted way than in ordinary news operation: all three were on the air almost constantly with the Dallas story and in most situations their cumbersome camera equipment was lined up side by side.

In the uncertainty caused by the assassination crisis [the Stanford report summarizes], television was an important source of information that alleviated some of the anxiety. . . . It structured and clarified the extent of personal threat. . . . It gave timely reassurance by showing the existence and continuity of cherished institutions and values. It reinforced social prescriptions for correct behavior by showing the exemplary conduct of the nation's leaders. . . . And it helped narcotize behavior that might have been dangerous by exhausting the need for action.

The physical confusion at Dallas, at the time of Oswald's arrest and when he was shot by Jack Ruby, underscored some simple but vital logistics of official news distribution which organizations other than the Dallas Police Department have long followed as routine. When you have a large group of reporters, you establish a press room where announcements and inquiries can be handled in an orderly way. When you have

a large group of observers of a physical operation such as Oswald's transfer from cell to van, you put the observers behind a rope where they can see but not interfere: a fifty-foot separation in the Dallas police headquarters basement would have thwarted Ruby.

But aside from such physical problems, the Dallas events, as the Stanford study suggests, posed no problems that have not confronted journalism for a long time. There is no question but that the press as a whole, in its zeal, altruistic or commercial, to inform the public, sometimes goes too far—but Dallas was not much of a case in point. This problem will probably persist as long as there are human beings involved in journalism, just as we will have occasional crooked judges, embezzling bank presidents, and immoral clerics. It is a problem far less amenable to some new procedural "code" than to assiduous application of established precepts of common sense, good taste and fairness.

Much criticism of the press's dissemination of information of a sensitive nature to individuals and organizations is based on a false premise: that is, that if the information were not published, a public vacuum on the subject would exist.

This is not so. On any development of interest to an appreciable number of people, reports immediately begin circulating rapidly by word of mouth. The Stanford studies showed that this was, initially, the most important channel of information on the Kennedy assassination. Everyone knows that it takes only a step or two in word-of-mouth communication for distortions to creep in; in a short time the distortions can become monstrous. "Mrs. Jones's husband took her to the doctor to get a shot" turns into: "I just heard—Mrs. Jones's husband shot her and they're rushing her to the doctor!"

The press is essentially society's mechanism for inhibiting such dangerous distortion by making uniform accounts available to the public. Heaven only knows the infinitude of panics, mob violence, general anarchy and social misery that has been averted by this function. It is what Thomas Jefferson was getting at when he said, "I would rather have newspapers without government than government without newspapers." Dallas, the Stanford report indicates, was a pretty good exemplification of this.

Visit the

**PROGRESSIVE
BOOKSHOP**

1506 W. 7th St., Los Angeles 90017

Center for works on world socialist
and liberal thought —
from Marx to Bertrand Russell

Up-to-date domestic and foreign
books • pamphlets • periodicals

Phone 483-8180