

Newswatch/Thomas Griffith

Muckraking Is Sometimes Sordid Work

In ancient days, before Watergate made Woodward and Bernstein household words, investigative reporting meant Drew Pearson. He was, as TIME said then, "the most intensely feared and hated man in Washington." From the '30s to the '60s, scoops in his syndicated column ("Washington Merry-Go-Round") or on his Sunday radio broadcasts became headlines: the Roosevelt court-packing plan, F.D.R.'s destroyers-for-bases swap with Churchill, the Patton soldier-slapping incident, Sherman Adams' vicuña coat and many other tales, worthy and less worthy.

In a new book, *Confessions of a Muckraker* (Random House; \$12.95), the late columnist's protégé and successor, Jack Anderson (writing with James Boyd), acknowledges that Pearson's "success and power rested in large measure in the practiced impugning of others." The book is a lively recall of triumphs that brought down the mighty, but it gains unexpected depth from Anderson's confession of troubled self-doubts. It is no great distortion of the book's message to say that investigative reporting, as its critics and victims have long insisted, often produces sordid victories.

Many of Pearson's methods wouldn't be tolerated today. He really went after people. He taught Anderson to look "first for those personal weaknesses . . . to cherish in an adversary: overweening vanity, bumbling pomposity, addiction to creature comforts, a tendency to alcoholic indiscretion, the heedless pursuit of venery." Opponents were destroyed not by reasoned argument but by a recital of their peccadilloes, endlessly repeated. When Anderson objected to such "scraps and chaff," his boss replied: "Once you catch one of these birds at anything, and you're sure of your facts, never worry about doing him an injustice by overplaying it. We'll never learn 10% of the evil they do."

What first impelled Pearson to pursue J. Parnell Thomas, head of the House Un-American Affairs Committee? The belief, according to Anderson, that the "Americanism that went in for public inquisitions into the political notions of movie actors was bound to attract the dishonest man, the cheat looking for a patriotic cover." So Pearson learned that Thomas was romancing a young woman in his office; a jealous older secretary's testimony about the Congressman's payroll padding sent Thomas to jail, and a grateful Pearson put her on his own payroll for 15 years. In Pearson's eagerness to defeat Senator Owen Brewster of Maine, whom he thought susceptible to influence peddling, he not only recruited an opposition candidate but also got money for his campaign from Brewster's enemy Howard Hughes. As a crusader, says Anderson, Pearson "had swapped silence on one story to gain access to another, had excused in allies what he pilloried in foes, had cut corners to get there first . . . had on occasion crossed the line into vindictiveness so as to keep the felled foe from getting up."

Perhaps a Quaker idealism, the conviction, as Anderson says, that military people "should regard war as a catastrophe, not an opportunity," helps explain Pearson's unrelenting animus toward Douglas MacArthur, George Patton and James Forrestal. He thought them dangerous men. Back in the '30s MacArthur had sued Pearson for

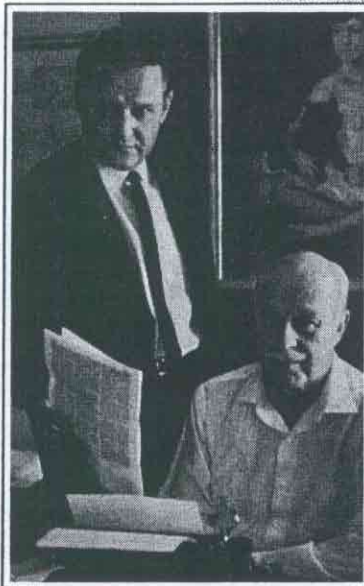
close to \$2 million. Pearson got out of the libel suit only after turning up a Eurasian chorus girl whom MacArthur had discarded, and agreeing not to publish, for as long as the general lived, his love letters to her. At Eisenhower's request, correspondents had suppressed the Patton soldier-slapping incident; Pearson considered Patton a warrior-authoritarian and in wartime broke the story. Pearson hectorated Forrestal with innuendo and false allegations while he was the nation's first Secretary of Defense; later, just before Forrestal killed himself, other reporters wrote discreetly of his nervous breakdown, but Pearson published an account of how Forrestal, at the sound of a fire alarm, had dashed out into the street crying, "The Russians are attacking!"

The Joe McCarthy story is more complicated. Pearson, says Anderson, had an early tip on Alger Hiss's Communist connection but, unable to substantiate it, had turned it over to the Government. And when McCarthy needed evidence to support his wild charges of Reds in Government, Anderson gave him an unsubstantiated tip about one of Truman's speechwriters; a "burn of shame singed through me," he says, when McCarthy denounced the man in the Senate. In time, McCarthy turned on Pearson, who had never been a big fan of the Senator's anyway. Calling Pearson an agent of Moscow, McCarthy demanded a "patriotic boycott" of Adam hats for sponsoring Pearson's broadcasts and drove him off the air. In return, Pearson uncovered McCarthy's phony war record, and then, by recounting the shabby antics of McCarthy's assistants Roy Cohn and G. David Schine, did much to destroy McCarthy.

Anderson still admires Pearson the man and the reporter, but not some of his tactics. "The accumulation of these tragedies, to which I was a direct contributor," Anderson says, raised a question: "Were these stories . . . worth the lives or sanity of people and the incalculable destruction wreaked upon their innocent families?" Confesses Anderson: "There are seasons when it seems a close call."

Muckrakers find themselves scorned by those Anderson calls "the tone setters of our profession." Having won a Pulitzer, as Pearson never did, Anderson now heads a successful journalistic cottage industry employing 17 reporters. He is seen five times a week on ABC's *Good Morning America*; his column appears in 942 papers. He can thus afford to laugh at the fact that in the nation's capital 30 years ago, an editor of the *Washington Post* ordered Pearson's column banished to the comic pages, "where it belongs." Several years ago, the *Post* offered to put Anderson's column on its more prestigious Op-Ed page, but Anderson, who figures that the comic page is better read, declined.

Anderson's muckraking tale is one of debatable ends constantly used to justify questionable means. Pearson was a Quaker, Anderson is a Mormon, but the Christianity that sustained them both often seems in their professional lives more evident in righteousness than in charity. It is harder to tell the black hats from the white hats when white hats become soiled.



Pearson at work, with Anderson, 1968