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Judging a Book by Its 'Coverup'

One of the season's bizarre choices for a book reviewer has to be William Safire to review Ben Bradlee's memoirs in the New York Times. Safire was Richard Nixon's flack and ghost for four years. Bradlee's glory is that he brought Richard Nixon down.

I know that book reviewing, particularly in the nation's capital, is a big logrolling operation. But Safire for Bradlee? Did they think of trying to get one of the Nixon girls? Or maybe Pat Buchanan? He wrote speeches for Nixon too.

Are we talking motive? Both institutional and personal scores could be paid off by the assignment, if you are of a conspiratorial frame of mind, as Safire's old boss so often was. The New York Times got its head kicked off in the Watergate scandal, never catching up with two kids under 30 who were gnawing at the pillars of the White House on the front page of The Washington Post. As for Safire, he still carries the torch for Nixon, devoting much time to finding "gates" in other presidents. To the end, he besought the only U.S. president to resign for political wisdom that he reverently recorded even when it was banal and platitudinous and often dead wrong. Times Book Review editor Chip McGrath says, "We needed an insider, neither a non-crony or a known enemy."

What makes the review funnier than you might expect is the fact that Safire leads off boldly with an accusation that Bradlee is guilty of destroying evidence. What chutzpah! What a hoot coming from the champion of the administration of the 18½-minute Watergate gap. Safire is talking about the burning of the diary of Bradlee's former sister-in-law, Mary Meyer, who was President John Kennedy's mistress. Safire is shocked, shocked at this loss to history. He hates coverups.

Safire recalls that he and Bradlee had some hot exchanges when Safire won the Pulitzer. Bradlee gruffed that Safire was "mean . . . a master of the cheap shot." Safire fired back. But in the Washington way, they made up and now,

Safire proudly reports, he is bidden to the "elegant" New Year's Eve party of Bradlee and his wife, Sally Quinn.

Almost anybody else in Washington might have written an uncritical review of "A Good Life." Bradlee is popular not only with people who worked for him but with people who worked against him. I speak as one who has done both. During my happy years on the Washington Star, he carried my

typewriter on the campaign trail. When the Star died and I went to The Post, almost immediately a large corporation threatened to sue me for libel. I consulted the executive editor, who was amused when I said I would love to testify against the moguls. He said, "Sounds like you're having fun, don't worry about it."

Even Safire liked the book, despite its highest point having been a low for him. "A Good Life" is not just about "a" good life, but the good life. Bradlee's father lost his money but not his spirit and his connections—and Bradlee, like all Yankee boys, went to Harvard. It was the Navy that formed him. He had hazardous duty, bobbing in a breeches buoy between destroyers in the South Pacific, sent to spruce up their communications systems. He found out during those terrifying days and nights that he could get people to do things.

He was a leader.

Life was fun for him. Sometimes it is hard to remember in these days of economy drives and diversity training that newspapering is fun, too. Bradlee hardly ever forgot, except maybe during the Janet Cooke ordeal when he had to return a Pulitzer Prize because a young reporter evaded his radar to involve the paper in a hoax. He had a powerful sense of humor. Like Scaramouche, "he was born with the gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad." And he was diligent in the pursuit of happiness. When he was getting his second divorce, he told his resentful son, "how sad it is to live without it."

Bradlee's book and Safire's review will keep Washington babbling for a long time. Most times, hereabouts, the critic is a pal to the author or beholden—or hoping to be invited on New Year's Eve.

Who knows, maybe when Safire publishes another book, Bradlee will get to review it. And hold Safire to standards he set in his Bradlee review. He takes him to task for not telling enough about Kennedy and his own professed ignorance of Kennedy's love life.

Will Safire tell us one day about what Nixon and Mrs. Nixon were really like? Will he come clean about Nixon and the secret bombing of Cambodia, or his most despicable decision—to prolong the war in Vietnam for four more years? We who were on the Enemies List are all ears.