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Martyr Without a Cause

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CLEARING THE AIR. By Daniel Schorr. Houghton Mifflin. 333 pp. \$11.95

By BOB WOODWARD

ONE WAY TO GET a book published these days is to mismanage your life's work in some sort of public way. Because of the nature of their jobs, reporters are almost inevitably liable to mismanage their information and make mistakes. Former CBS correspondent Daniel Schorr could have apologized for his in this memoir. He doesn't.

Schorr is still embattled, fighting the old wars from his 23 years in television news, as well as the more recent battle over a House intelligence report he passed to the Village Voice last year. He has taken on too many tasks for his 300 pages—criticizing television as a medium, CBS in particular, the network bosses, government, Congress and the intelligence agencies—and the book is very disjointed. Accustomed to doing a minute and ten seconds for tel-

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evision, he has not mastered a sustained narrative. He dashes off on his impulses to pick up an anecdote decades earlier or to jump ahead to fore-shadow. If not give away entirely, the ending. (For example, page 10 deals with events from 1963 to 1977; page 13 those from 1962 to 1972.) Parts of the book are a diary and others use the question-and-answer format.

Along the way, we learn that Schorr had been involved in some earlier reporting controversies before the House Ethics Committee subpoenaed him for making public the suppressed House report on the CIA and intelligence agencies and then trying to conceal his role as the intermediary.

For example, in 1964 Schorr reported that Republican presidential candidate Senator Barry Goldwater was going to make a post-convention trip to Germany. On the air Schorr said this was "a move by Senator Goldwater to link up" with the German right wing. Schorr writes that this was "one sloppy and unfortunate mistake." In fact, it was a grotesque mistake with the innuendo that Goldwater was making some potential Third Reich connection. Schorr refers to it as one of those "ragging little matters" that was never settled between himself and CBS. I can only suspect that if he rightly shook the conf-



Illustration by Richard Wilson for The Washington Post

dence of his CBS superiors that a reporter as bright as Schorr did not realize or would not admit, he had made a mistake.

Schorr the reporter—often the one to come up with the essential and tough question—should have been harder on himself in this book. He does not come close to addressing the really big questions posed by his experience, including the leaked CIA re-

In any public controversy, there are a few key moments when important decisions are made which eventually determine its course and outcome. Often the fact that a pivotal decision has been made is not known at the

time. Part of any good analysis involves finding those moments and figuring out what went right or wrong—especially if you get hit with a brick in the face as Schorr did. However, he chooses to slide over those moments and key decisions.

This is very disappointing because Schorr was certainly one of the finest broadcast journalists and his contribution to television reporting could very well be unsurpassed. But in the end, this book will probably detract from his reputation as one of the toughest reporters in the business.

After Schorr obtained a copy of the Pike Committee intelligence report, he made an extensive television report from the leaked document. Despite the fact that the full House had voted to suppress it, he rightly decided that it should be printed in full and made available to the public. According to his own account, when CBS showed a lack of interest in publishing the whole thing, his response was to go elsewhere and to do what he was doing. When he discovered that he alone had a copy of the report, "Perhaps too exclusively for comfort," Schorr made a decision: "Several leaks would have made it difficult to ascertain my original source; a single leak

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was another matter. To add a layer of protection for my source, it seemed advisable to conceal my role, leaving some uncertainty about which copy of the report was being published."

This concealment included stonewalling to CBS and other reporters. How would concealing his role protect his source? He doesn't answer; that is the weak link in his justification. Did he think that publication would anger the House of Representatives more than his nightly appearances on television reading selected excerpts from the document? There is no evidence of that. The House only became interested in Schorr—and he only became a plausible target for subpoena—when he alienated the natural support he would have expected from CBS, other news organizations and reporters. It is commonly believed that the press

turned against Schorr because his releasing the report involved an exchange of money, although Schorr was committed to having all proceeds directed to the Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press. But the real trouble was that in a business where there is the highest respect for getting the facts, Schorr had concealed an important fact—by failing to identify himself as the intermediary.

Schorr still thinks this is all unfair and calls his stonewalling merely "on-the-record disclaimers and sophistic evasions" while once again invoking his strained claim that "I was trying to protect a source."

If Schorr realizes what he was risking, not just for himself but for all reporters, there is no evidence in this book. He had taken a good principle—the protection of confidential news sources—and abused it. Why? In this book, he may unwittingly give the an-

swer. When the Village Voice was first mentioned as a possible publisher, Schorr writes that his reaction was "Oh, Christ, not that!" He apparently had low regard for the New York weekly. But half a page later, Schorr accepts the Voice offer "as a last resort." He had not made a real effort to find alternatives. Before the Village Voice entered the picture, Schorr says he had been willing to come out openly and "boldly with a by-lined introduction and statement of purpose." Why wasn't he worried about protecting his source then? I strongly suspect that protecting the source was only the cover story for protecting Schorr. He was not so proud of his publisher as he was embarrassed with the liberal, sometimes offbeat weekly. So on a matter of style, or perhaps prestige, he cheapened the principle of protecting sources.

I dwell on this because many govern-

ment officials, judges and congressmen are uncomfortable with that privilege. Although it is an important tool for reporters, it is not specifically mentioned in the Constitution. And a number of courts have refused to acknowledge its constitutional status.

So when Schorr was called before the House Ethics Committee to name his source, he was, in a sense, representing all reporters. It was a bad case on which to test the principle in Congress because Schorr had lost the unanimous backing of the news profession. (And many of those reporters who spoke publicly in his favor stressed the fact that they were supporting the principle of protecting sources, and not Schorr.)

In recalling his testimony before the committee, Schorr seems equally lacking in awareness of what happened to him. His testimony was brilliant, as he is not particularly shy about noting. In the face of it, the committee backed down and did not attempt to cite him for contempt after he flatly refused to name his source. "Some sort of miracle had happened," Schorr writes, "the confrontation had turned into a classroom—for Congress and for the nation. The First Amendment seemed alive and well."

Simply stated, that "miracle" occurred because Schorr was not his arrogant and combative self. That was achieved not by Schorr so much as by his lawyers: a "legal dynamo," as Schorr calls it, headed by Joseph Califano (now the HEW Secretary and formerly counsel to The Washington Post). We later learn that the "miracle" cost \$150,000 in legal fees to Califano. Anyone who could make Schorr into a reasoned and tempered advocate probably earned his \$150,000.

The way in which Schorr describes his relationship with Califano is typical of the self-aggrandizement which runs throughout the book: "He seemed to respect me as a journalist almost as much as I respected him as a lawyer." There are dozens of other self-serving references, such as the reminder that Schorr got one vote for vice president at the Democratic National Convention in 1976, or the remark that "perhaps the ultimate sign of having become a 'household word' was finding myself a crossword-puzzle word in the Sunday New York Times."

Considered as a whole, the weaknesses of this book are what Schorr says are the problems of television—namely, a tendency "to trivialize its conflicts, personalize its disputes and construct its own consoling realities." □