

Multimedia Maven

Jack Anderson Empire Grows—and So Does Criticism It Receives

Column Is Called Reckless, Trivial, and He Decries Little Heed Paid to Him

Is He 'Stretched Too Thin'?

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WASHINGTON — Investigative Reporter Jack Anderson is a veritable multimedia conglomerate.

Backed by a staff of 20 people working out of a Victorian town house six blocks from the White House, Mr. Anderson writes daily and weekly columns, appears five days a week on network television and three times daily on radio and gives about 35 lectures a year for \$3,000 each plus expenses.

But the bigger Jack Anderson grows, and the more money his enterprise takes in (probably close to \$750,000 a year), the more criticism he collects.

There are grumblings that he doesn't come up with the big blockbuster stories anymore. "The column just isn't as strong as it used to be," says Jim Hampton, editorial-page editor of the Miami Herald. "He's stretched too thin. We might let him go if we didn't know a competitor would pick him up."

More serious is the charge that in the pursuit of the elusive big story Mr. Anderson has become, in the words of a prominent Washington bureau chief, "recklessly irresponsible." Jody Powell, the White House press secretary, charges that the columnist has undertaken a "vendetta" against the Carter administration.

Mr. Anderson contends that his reporting is as strong as ever, insisting that his peers don't pay enough attention to his work. They're too busy going to dinner parties in Georgetown, he suggests. "We invented investigative reporting in this town, and nobody can beat us at our own game," says the 56-year-old Mr. Anderson, a portly, rumped figure who sometimes wears an old yellow sweater with traces of jelly on it.

In fact, Mr. Anderson has broken more big stories than just about anyone else in Washington since he went to work 31 years ago as a part-time, \$50 a week assistant to muckraking columnist Drew Pearson. Mr. Anderson took over the column after Mr. Pearson's death in 1969 and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1972 for disclosing minutes of a Nixon White House meeting, showing the U.S. was "tilting" towards Pakistan in that nation's war with India.



According to Mr. Anderson, his column now appears in 1,000 newspapers. The editor of his syndicate puts the figure at "more than 700." Outsiders can't be sure because the list is a trade secret. Either way, though, he is far ahead of his competition.

The daily column remains the bedrock upon which the Anderson empire is built. But Miami's Mr. Hampton isn't alone in thinking that it is sometimes thin and often irrelevant to the target that Mr. Anderson says he aims for—the "Kansas City milkman." The Washington Post, his "flagship paper," also would like to let his column go, according to an editor who prefers to remain anonymous, but the rival Washington Star would probably grab it.

Trivia on President

Some of Mr. Anderson's columns these days do seem thin. A few weeks ago, for example, he led off a column by presenting "some of the things the grown men and women of the press corps want to know about President Carter"—a compilation of trivia about the size of his shoes (10-C) and his favorite food (sirloin steak, rare). The list has been available at the press office for months.

And the subjects sometimes are repetitious and obscure. In a period of three months, he led his column eight times with stories about the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. Mr. Anderson concedes that might have been "overkill."

Some reporters in Washington think Mr. Anderson is becoming something of an anachronism. "He's obsessed with secret documents and cables and unpublished reports," says one newsman. Mr. Anderson tells his readers about Pentagon "brass hats" wasting millions of taxpayers' dollars, high "muck-a-mucks" on the take, "striped-pants" diplomats cuddling up to "tinhorn" dictators, business "tycoons" cheating their customers.

The secret to his success, Mr. Anderson says, is "sources." He refuses to identify any of them, but even a cursory reading of his columns indicates a recurring source is Rep. John M. Murphy, a New York Democrat, who is under investigation by the Justice Department for alleged tax evasion and failure to register as a foreign agent. (Mr. Murphy, an aide says, doesn't know anything about an investigation.)

Murphy "No Angel"

Mr. Anderson says that Mr. Murphy is "no angel" but that the Congressman understands the needs of an investigative reporter. "If you're desperate for a column," Mr. Anderson says, "you can always call Murphy's office and pick up something, just like that."

The columnist tends to ignore stories that deal with such things as political ethics. What about, say, a bright young Congress-

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man voting for a special interest that contributed to his campaign?

"If we took a question of immorality—against one of plain crookedness—to Jack, he'd say, 'What did this man do? Where's the evidence?'" says Gary Cohn, Mr. Anderson's most enterprising young reporter. "Jack wouldn't be interested in a story like that," says Mr. Cohn, who is known affectionately around the shop as "Mad Dog."

To Mr. Anderson, the charge that he is reckless with the facts is a sensitive one. "Drew (Pearson)," he says, "was careless of his facts. It was always a bone of contention between us." But Mr. Anderson says that when he took over the column in 1969, he laid down rigid rules about checking facts. And "now, when we make a mistake, I want to make sure we apologize for it."

To this day, though, Mr. Anderson won't apologize for what many people think was his worst mistake—his report on radio in 1972 that Sen. Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, the Democratic nominee for Vice President, had been arrested for drunken and reckless driving during the 1960s. "We jumped the gun on that one," concedes Mr. Anderson, who admitted that he broadcast the story without sufficient verification. He still insists, though, that he had more than one source for his information about Sen. Eagleton.

It is Mr. Anderson's search for the increasingly elusive blockbuster that Jody Powell contends has led to an anti-administration vendetta by the columnist, an allegation Mr. Anderson denies. The "vendetta," Mr. Powell says, is a fallout from the reporting of the columnist's biggest story in the past year—the so-called "political fix" involving the fugitive financier Robert Vesco and the White House. White House aide Hamilton Jordan says he is still thinking about filing a libel suit in the case.

Mr. Anderson reported in 13 separate columns that "letters, telephone messages and testimony linked" Mr. Jordan and the President's most-trusted personal adviser, Charles Kirbo, to a "South Georgia group" that sought a \$10 million slice of Vesco's "stolen fortune" to fix Vesco's legal problems in Washington. Mr. Jordan and Mr. Kirbo say that whatever the group from Georgia was up to, they were never a part of it.

Crucial to Mr. Anderson's story were two factors: the validity of the documents turned over to him by R. L. Herring, a convicted swindler, and the apparent decision by the Justice Department to drop its efforts to extradite Vesco from Costa Rica so he could stand trial here on charges he looted his financial empire of more than \$224 million.

Two things happened. First, it turned out the Justice Department hadn't ended its pursuit of Vesco; it had merely switched tactics—from extradition to expulsion from Costa Rica. Second, the documents tying Mr. Jordan and Mr. Kirbo to the political fix, Mr. Anderson was forced to concede, were "reconstructed." Others involved in the case said that explanation was charitable—the documents were "fabricated." A

grand jury in Washington is looking into the matter.

Mr. Anderson insists he asked the right questions when he talked to Mr. Jordan at the White House and Attorney General Griffin Bell at the Justice Department. But spokesmen at the White House and the Justice Department say Mr. Anderson made no effort to get their side of the story. "He was interested in getting our denials; he didn't care about what really had happened," one of them says.

Columnist Bill Shipp of the Atlanta Constitution has seen some of the documents in question and concludes, "This is the greatest flim-flam perpetrated in these parts since they closed down all the shell games in South Georgia." He says Mr. Anderson was taken on a "merry chase" by a collection of good of Georgia country boys.

Grand Jury Testimony

Typically, though, Mr. Anderson hasn't backed down on this story, either. He says he has testified before the grand jury and so have the folks from South Georgia who gave him the "evidence." They still insist the documents are "reconstructed, not fabricated," Mr. Anderson says. And in fact, there are still some puzzling aspects to the case. One is an unexplained handwritten message from President Carter to Attorney General Bell asking him to talk to one of the members of the South Georgia group. Mr. Bell says he never saw the note.

And what about the "vendetta"?

Once, Press Secretary Powell says, Mr. Anderson was upbeat in his reporting about the White House. Early on, in fact, the White House leaked a "secret" cable to a delighted Mr. Anderson. The cable was from the American ambassador in Italy, reporting what a great hit Miss Lillian, the President's mother, had been during her visit to Italy. Mr. Anderson used the item.

Since the Vesco reporting, though, Mr. Powell says, Mr. Anderson's reporting has been almost entirely negative. And in one of his columns, he came a cropper again.

Griffin Bell Case

He reported late last year that Attorney General Bell "mediated" a squabble in Savannah, Ga., "which helped his buddies pull off a scheme that effectively reduced black representation on the city council." And, Mr. Anderson continued, "by a curious coincidence, the Attorney General's intervention came shortly after his son was appointed to a \$40,000 job by the city fathers in Savannah."

Mr. Anderson subsequently ran a correction with his column conceding the Attorney General's son was appointed by the school board, not by the Attorney General's "buddies" and "city fathers." After that, he turned over a large chunk of his column to a personal statement by Attorney General Bell, who concluded: "... dragging in my son was beyond the pale."

Mr. Bell "had a right to be upset about it," Mr. Anderson says. The original reporting, he says, was done by phone. "I made a mistake in not sending a reporter down there." He says his reporters made mistakes in both the Vesco and the Savannah

stories. He explains he just doesn't have enough reporters to check everything out on the scene.

On the lecture circuit, Mr. Anderson is even tougher on the Carter administration than he is in print or on the air.

"The President," he says in his standard speech, "is basically a decent human being, convinced of the rightness of his faith. At the same time, he's a politician." Mr. Anderson says he has talked to the President, man to man, in the Oval Office. He says Mr. Carter told him he "prays at least a dozen times a day." But, says Mr. Anderson, "the President keeps changing his policy, and I don't think God is responsible for that."

The President's Cabinet isn't so bad, he says. "But, like Richard Nixon before him, he has surrounded himself with amateurs."

He says the President told him he relies first of all on his wife, Rosalynn, for advice. "But she has no more experience than he has!"

Then, he says, the President turns to Atlanta's Charles Kirbo, "but he doesn't know anything about Washington!"

After that, the President turns to Hamilton Jordan and Jody Powell. "And they don't know what they're doing!"

Nostalgia for Gerald Ford

In the question-and-answer period that followed a recent lecture by Mr. Anderson in Greenville, Miss., he conceded he had voted for Mr. Carter. But, he added, "I regret it. We'd have been better off if we had reelected Gerald Ford."

Mr. Anderson was a Mormon missionary in the South when he was a young man—and his speaking style grows out of that experience. On the lecture circuit, he is so flamboyant he embarrasses some of his own reporters. He waves his arms, strokes his considerable stomach, whispers punch lines into the microphone. He's a great hit with most of his crowds.

In private, though, he is almost a different person. He never shouts and he's good at listening.

Mr. Anderson and his wife, Livvy, have nine children, three of whom are still at home. He rarely takes a vacation but tries to get in long weekends at his summer cottage in Rehoboth Beach, Del. More and more in recent years, he has taken to working at his home in suburban Maryland because it's quieter there, he says.

In the office, his reporters are free to walk right in and talk to him about almost anything. Most members of his staff like him and respect him. Les Whitten, who was his best reporter until he left to write novels, says, simply, "I love that man." (Mr. Whitten recently came back to work part-time for Mr. Anderson.)

Many reporters in Washington don't like Jack Anderson. It is partly professional jealousy, partly distaste for his bombastic style and, increasingly, a feeling that he doesn't, in the words of a recent magazine profile, "hit the long ball anymore."

"I don't smoke and I don't drink and I don't go to fancy dinner parties in Washington," says Mr. Anderson. He implies that other Washington reporters do all the things he doesn't. He says he represents a minority that is "cantankerous enough to assail those in power."

"Investigative reporting," Mr. Anderson says, "is on the wane. But we're running the same old shop here. It's the same old way of doing things. We won't ever stop."