

# The Prince of Political Pulp

*Victor Lasky: The Man, the Myth and the Marksman*

By Paul Hendrickson

It is opening night of the International Horse Show and the D.C. Armory is fairly gagged with Washington society. Upstairs, in the Presidential box, Mr. and Mrs. Ford are watching the Argentine Ambassador trying to get his mount over a three-foot fence. (The animal canters smoothly to the gate, but balks each time.) Downstairs, in a makeshift bar called the Trophy Club, amid plastic plants and BOAC travel posters, the author of *Arthur J. Goldberg: The Old and the New* is an instant celebrity. And he is bluffing all the way.

"Yeah," says pudgy, 56-year-old Victor Lasky in what sounds like borrowed Brooklynese, "when the news broke that the Rockefellers backed the book, my immediate reaction was 'Who needs the publicity?' Here I am sitting in McCormick Place in Chicago a couple of weeks ago, listening to Bob Abplanalp give a banquet speech to some packaging guys, when my wife Patty rushes in and says there's eight or nine reporters outside. I leaned over to Rebozo—who was feeling pretty good by the way—and said, 'Bebe, I think I'm in some hot water.' He looked at me and said, 'Lasky, you don't know what hot water is.'"

A plump matron dripping with jewelry

has swirled up and embraced the writer. "I wanted to call you this week," she pants, "but I knew your phone would be ringing off the hook." "Goldberg had it bugged, sweetheart," he returns, his pan as dead as something in the sink the next morning. She recoils in exaggerated horror and he says in a Groucho aside: "I can never re-

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◻ *Victor Lasky at work in his Watergate apartment.*

member this broad's name." Then he spies Nancy Lammerding, White House social secretary, across the room. "Oh, Naaaaancy," he calls out sweetly. She doesn't look up.

"Where was I? Oh yeah: the book. Well, now I'm starting to enjoy the notoriety. Funny thing is, I never read it when it came out back in '70. I looked at my manuscript a few times before I handed it in, that's all. Christ, I wrote it in three weeks. You want to call me a hack? Okay, so I'm a hack. So we're all hacks in this business. So I didn't interview the man. A lot of people who wrote psychoanalyses of Mr. Nixon never talked to *him*. Sure I made a fast ten. I took the money and ran like a thief."

A man in tails and a white tie, who looks

at the very least like the minister from Pakistan, heaves into view. "Hey, Henry, they got ya sprayin' the horses tonight?" Then under his breath: "I think he's in insurance."

"Look, I got principles, okay? This business that I'm for hire is crap. Could the Democrats get me? And listen, I will not write about Teddy Kennedy, even though I've been offered good bread. I mean, enough is enough. I get the willies every time I think of how his two brothers died after my books came out. I figure I dropped a minimum of half a mill on *JFK: The Man and the Myth*. I canceled all my speaking engagements and talk show appearances and demanded the publishers stop the presses for a couple of weeks. I was glad to do it."

Peter Malatesta, once an aide to Spiro Agnew, has come over to chat. "Looked for you at Sinatra's show in the Garden," says Lasky offhandedly, pulling a Don Diego cigar from his vest pocket, then lighting it with a matchbook advertising the Key Biscayne Hotel. They hobnob for ten minutes or so, and after Malatesta goes back upstairs, the writer, suddenly sober, says:

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"Life is damn funny. You take Peter there. Agnew should have been President by now and he'd have been at the very top. Coming in here tonight I saw the presidential limousine parked out front. You know, I've been in that car twice in my life, both times as the guest of Mr. Nixon. It's quite a ride. But that's over now and I'll never get another chance. That's the way it works, I guess. Just a roll of the dice..."

And then, almost softly: "Look, I don't take myself very seriously. I'm not in this horsey set—I only know what they smell like. These people you see here are the steadies. Guys like me glide in and out of their world all the time. What I am, when you get down to it, is an old rewrite man off an afternoon newspa-

per."

That is all. In the next moment, he is back to the one-liners, the catcalling, the mildly dirty jokes, the slash-and-mash style that keeps anyone from getting too close. Finally, he is left alone in the room with a reporter and an old black man picking glasses

off the tables. "Come by the apartment," he says. "Patty and I'll show you our fan mail." At that, Victor Lasky exits, laughing, sweetheart, laughing.

**J**ust what makes Victor run still has his odd lot of liberal and conservative friends a touch mystified. He was born Abram Victor Lasky to Jew-

ish immigrants. His father, who had come to America from the Russian provinces, soon moved his family from the Catskills down to Manhattan, just above Hell's Kitchen. There, the elder Lasky worked as a salesman, afterward as the owner of a string of five-and-dimes. (Both parents are still alive, retired to Queens.)

He grew up with the tough, West Side Irish—swimming



Victor Lasky

Photograph by Matthew Lewis

in the Hudson, hopping freights, getting run over by a truck at 11. At Brooklyn College, he read Jack London adventure stories and studied politics. He also went to the movies and saw "Front Page." That hooked him, and before long he was a \$12-a-week copy boy at the old Journal American. (Later, on the desk of the World-Telegram in New York, he would get the reputation as one of the quickest studies in the business. When Mahatma Gandhi died, he pulled all the clippings and wrote a 15-page obit in two hours.)

But by then, he was interested in something else, too: anti-Communist socialism. The New York intellectual ferment of the '30s made his head swim, friends remember. Norman Thomas became his hero; publications like the New Leader, his Bible. "I don't know that he ever really felt a part of the movement, though," says Harry Fleischman, a onetime national secretary of the Socialist Party and now an officer of the American Jewish Committee. "He'd come up to our offices, sit around, maybe

wrap a few packages of pamphlets. I don't remember him at too many meetings."

Murray Kempton, the longtime New York Post columnist, met Lasky in 1938 when the two were students and shared similar ideologies. "There was always something of the outsider in him," he recalls. "He reminded me of a taxi driver forever trying to get his license. Still, you couldn't help liking Vic."

A lot of people say that. Pat Buchanan, who has known Lasky since 1966 when Richard Nixon got them together, says he counts the writer among his closest friends. "He's the one guy I can call up any time. We like to go down to the Guards on M Street for dinner with our wives. I'll tell you this: he's loyal to a fault to those he cares about."

Even people on the other side of the ideological fence have regard for the personal, if not professional, Lasky. Frank Mankiewicz, who goes back with the writer to the early '50s, seems a trifle embarrassed about his friendship with him now. "He's always been fun to be around," he

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says. "I remember I saw him once at the White House in '70 and said, 'Hey Vic, what's up?' When he told me he was writing a book about Nixon, I said, 'Does he know?' He got the joke."

When World War II broke out, Lasky went on leave from his newspaper job in Chicago to join up with Stars and Stripes, the U.S. Army daily, in London. Peter Lisagor, now Washington bureau chief for the Chicago Daily News, was his editor; also his housemate in a place behind Buckingham Palace. "He was a good time and a facile writer," says Lisagor, "even if all his feature stories began with the

guy going from pants presser to millionaire." (Supposedly, Sam Goldwyn was so irked at being called a "former pants presser" by Lasky that he complained to the American ambassador, who in turn called up Ike.)

But Lisagor and others also remember that he could turn in brilliant pieces. One, on Bernard Baruch, imitated in print the peculiar way that baron of business talked. Another, entitled "Yes, Mr. Coward, Brooklyn Boys Do

Cry," was a moving reply to Noel Coward's ridicule of the GI; they say he wrote it from his gut in 20 minutes.

"We were all kind of surprised when Vic got on the treason beat after the war," says Lisagor. "All I remember is that he was ambitious. He was no more a reactionary back then than I was."

One theory for Lasky's sudden switch after the war from democratic socialism to right-wing Republicanism is that he felt a sense of rejection from the New York liberal, intellectual community. (Irvin Taubkin, for years an executive at the New York Times and another close friend, testifies that Lasky has always felt a bit uncomfortable around eggheads.) Another theory is that Republicanism was where the action lay for anti-Communism in the early '50s. But a far more likely explanation is that on August 3, 1948, in an elevator in one of the House office buildings, Victor Lasky met Richard M. Nixon. And as Kempton and others have said, he must have smelled the power even then.

Later, when the California congressman was making na-

tional headlines in the Alger Hiss-Whittaker Chambers spy case, the two would get together out at the house in Arlington for Pat's fried chicken. (Lasky figures he's since been with Nixon on 100 occasions.) *Seeds of Treason*, Lasky's account of the sensational trial, which he co-authored with Ralph de Toledano then of Newsweek, shortly followed and was a success. He had found his schtick. The \$110-a-week reporter was on his way to becoming the prince of political pulp.

For 25 years, he has been working the same side of the street. There have been film-writing stints in Hollywood (one of his anti-Communist documentaries, "The Hoaxsters," was nominated for an Academy Award); speeches for candidate Nixon (he went out to California in 1962 for the governor's race and, among other things, came back with the poodle that had served as the campaign's mascot); jokes for Martha Mitchell (Jeb Magruder revealed during the Watergate hearings that the Committee for the Re-Election of the President had paid Lasky \$20,000 for gags and a few

luncheon remarks).

Not to mention a half-dozen books. Norman Mailer, reviewing *JFK: The Man and the Myth*, wrote that Lasky "could have left us with a classic in political biography," but that the book failed in the end because it contained "no intimation of the curious depths in the President's nature." But the quick job (he wrote it in less than nine months) was a runaway best-seller of 1963 and earned Lasky nearly \$400,000. Relying heavily on clips (at the end, there are 37 fine-print pages of acknowledgments), the book often succeeds in showing Kennedy on both sides of major issues through the years. There are more than a few petty jabs, however—such as how Kennedy climbed over seats at his Inaugural Ball and, as a Congressman, used to hit people at restaurants for the check. Still, it is a thoroughgoing work. Roscoe Drummond wrote that it was just what the doctor ordered for the '64 campaign.

In 1968, Lasky wrote *Robert F. Kennedy: The Myth and the Man*. This one is replete with little mudballs—like the time Bobby supposedly asked

a secretary to pick up his discarded underwear. The Little Brother allegedly had Lasky's phone tapped after the JFK book and had him investigated by the Immigration Department; the anger still showed in Lasky's writings five years later. (It is interesting to note, in light of current events, that Nelson Rockefeller publicly took up for Lasky at a speech in French Lick, Indiana, when he heard about the author's alleged invasion of privacy.) In the Bobby book, as in some of his others, Lasky didn't interview his subject, although he insists the younger Kennedy was scheduled to see him twice, and both times didn't show; Mankiewicz denies it.

Lasky has also written ex-Senator George Murphy's life story. "We made a nice piece of change," he says. "Patty did most of the interviewing and I did most of the writing."

Today, at least, Lasky claims he never wanted to do the now-famous Goldberg book. A New York lawyer named John Wells, who was both a friend of the writer and an old hand of Rocky, came

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by urging him to "set the record straight" on the Democratic candidate for governor. Lasky said Goldberg was too dull for him to bother. Wells replied that there was \$10,000 in it. Lasky shrugged and said he guessed a fellow could write a book about anything, even artichokes.

He went to the Republican National Committee and got the file on Goldberg, read Robert Shaplen's series in the

New Yorker, then set to work. The result was 200 pages of vintage Lasky—weaving in whatever criticism was available with his own caustic comment. He takes delight, for instance, in calling his subject "Mr. Justice" and "the man from Chicago" (implying pomposity in the first and carpetbaggery in the second). He says Goldberg got rich during the Depression by foreclosing other people's

property, and that he rose in the labor movement because he was a Red Baiter. At one point, he gossips about how the man pouted in his room when Columbia University didn't send around a limousine for his lecture series. Though Goldberg himself has pronounced it all "pornography," in fairness, the book seems little different from most other campaign quickies, certainly no worse than those that sprang up about Barry Goldwater during the 1964 presidential election. More than 116,000 copies were ultimately printed, but today the book is next to impossible to obtain. Lasky has maintained throughout the current controversy that, though he knew the assignment came from the Rockefeller camp, he had no idea the money did. (The book's financing, reportedly, was laundered through a Philadel-

phia law firm in the name of Literary Productions, Inc., an instant Delaware corporation chartered solely for that purpose.) But he has also said it probably wouldn't have made any difference. The canceled check, he claims; has either been lost or is buried among his things in New York.

(On October 15, 1974, Lasky testified at the Rockefeller confirmation hearings. Book in one hand, cigar in the other, he promptly set about defending his much-maligned manuscript. When asked about the vice presidential nominee's own characterization of the book as an overrated, misrepresented, innocuous political dud, Lasky, looking as if he'd been shot through with an arrow, replied: "I don't like those words.")

After polishing off that little plum, the writer moved in

1970 to Washington to begin work on an "approved" biography of Richard Nixon. The manuscript, some 300,000 words, has been rejected by Lasky's publisher; Lasky is vague on the reason, but says he will resubmit it after revision; in the meantime, he's coughed up his advance.

Today, he writes a syndicated column for the North American Newspaper Alliance. Called "Say it Straight," the 750-word weekly commentary (to 100 newspapers) advocates such things as an immediate threat by Mr. Ford to resign unless Mr. Rockefeller were confirmed (Oct. 25, 1974). For such political insight, Lasky claims he makes only \$30 per week. He also hustles a little radio commentary on WAVA in Washington. (The money for this one is also ridiculous, he says. When you ask, therefore, how he gets by, he shrugs and

says he just does; he adds, however, that were it not for the royalties on the JFK book, he'd have been in trouble a long time ago.) But also these days Victory Lasky must be sitting in his den, amid enough files and clippings to crowd a warehouse, and wondering how he can get rid of his rep as the fastest hired gun in town.

For whether he publicly wants to admit it or not, it has come down to that. Under all those mountains of words, after all that huffing and puffing, Victor Lasky's career now seems something of a caricature, a cartoon of the Great American Effort. And that is grimly ironic. Frank Mankiewicz feels that back there a long time ago, when two roads diverged in a yellow wood, Lasky might just as easily have gone the other way. Right-wing ideology was never so much the issue as opportunity. Now he is stuck.

He chose his path and as Frost so succinctly put it, that has made all the difference . . .

He is at home now, with his wife and poodle, in the Watergate. It is a spotless, two-bedroom apartment with period furniture and tasteful pictures on the wall. Mrs. Lasky, a soft-spoken blond Baptist from Ohio (they met at Toots Shor's in New York when he was in newspapers, she in advertising), is getting set to do her afternoon marketing. Before she leaves, she places on the coffee table a postcard and an opened letter. One begins, "You are a dirty, common, foul-mouthed gents' room journalist and when the time for your passing arrives, the world will be that much better off." The other reads, "You were always a creepy, crumbly son-of-a-bitch, but you have progressed comparably to the low-

est type of snake and lower than the lowest type of prostitute." She kisses her husband on the cheek and goes out the door.

"Patty tries not to let on," he says in flat, even tones, "but this kind of stuff really upsets her." He is in Gucci loafers and a sport shirt; Charlie Brown the poodle dozes in his lap. "But you have to be able to take the heat. After the Goldberg flap, we had 48 calls in one day, everything from cranks to the L.A. Times to somebody wanting me to write a book for him on New Jersey corruption. You know, I never received one letter about the Goldberg book when it came out. But now I get these stories in the paper of some hateful ogre who goes around destroying people. Sure that bothers me. I don't hate anybody, not Arthur Goldberg, not the Kennedys. I'm just making a living like

the next guy. But that's okay: I found out a long time ago about the hurt instinct among journalists."

In fact, Lasky says his life is pretty good these days. He walks Charlie Brown, down by the river. He bumps into Senator Symington in the halls. He works out at the Watergate's health club (he says he's got to lose 15 pounds fast). The other Sunday, Bob Abplanalp gave the Laskys a ride down from New York in his private plane. "It's not like I'm under siege, you know. I've got plenty of friends. They don't think I'm a monster. It's inconceivable to any of us that this little book could bring down a vice president."

Late that evening, the writer is the featured guest on "Empathy" at WWDC Radio in Silver Spring. There is something surreal about the night. Bulletins on Richard

Nixon's lapse into shock in California and Muhammad Ali's impossible victory in Africa are coming over the wire every ten minutes. Behind paneled glass, in a kind of drab-green phosphorescent glow, Fred Fiske, the show's host, is suggesting to Lasky that there is immorality in accepting \$10,000 from mysterious sources. The two shout at one another on the point, then chit-chat like old golf buddies during the break. ("I just came to hoke it up and pump up the guy's ratings," Lasky says later.) When the audience begins to phone in comments, he is alternately abrasive and charming—smirking like a schoolboy, glowering like John Mitchell, never quite letting on to the world out there that it is all just a pose, a charade, and that if he weren't doing this, why, he might be standing all day under flapping pennants

on a used-car lot. In that moment, you can't help picturing Willy Loman in a pair of double-knits.

Afterward, being driven home through the blackness of Rock Creek Park, he sits in the front seat of a Subaru with his hands clasped on his stomach and his glasses sliding down his nose. "We almost lost our man out there in California tonight," he says. "I don't believe this crap that he's lost his will to live. He's gonna make it—and so am I, even though I'll be working till I die. Ten years ago, I was pretty well off. Right now, things are tight. That's why I've got to capitalize on all this publicity. Here I am sitting on a goddam goldmine and I got nothing to sell. It's incredible." Then, like some great exhausted babe, Victor Lasky drops his head against the darkened glass and eases into dreams. ■