

30.x.71  
El Jardin  
Mijas (Malaga)

Dear Mr Policoff:

Your August 30 letter, or the carbon of your August 30 letter, reached me this afternoon. I was indeed wondering what had become of your reply, and now I am glad to know that it went astray and was not neglected.

It is courteous, and I appreciate that. I found the last issue less so.

I don't have much to add to my last letter to you. Except to answer your question at the top of page 2—"Wasn't it your prerogative to review or not to review, to assign or not to assign any book you saw fit?" Yes and no. There was an active and frequent collaboration between me and the managing editor--Benjamin Bradlee (but not between me and the editor, J.R. Wiggins.) Every month I would gather a list of possible books for review--the list would include roughly twice as many titles as our space could accommodate, and I would take this list, together with a roster of possible reviewers--to Mr Bradlee's office. I am a novelist, I know fiction, belle Lettres, cultural matters very well. My selections in those areas were not negotiable. Because he knew them less well than I. On the other hand, where public affairs were concerned, he was exponentially more knowledgeable than I. And he had a very wide range of associations among potential reviewers. So there would be a collaboration between us. But an editorial meeting does not a conspiracy make, as I'm sure you will agree. It was at a meeting with Ben Bradlee (and not J.R. Wiggins) that we decided I would not review Kennedy assassination books (for all the reasons I have given.) And, yes, I felt very, very ~~awkward~~ awkward reviewing Robert Kaiser. I did so because it is ~~Newweek's~~ Newweek's policy to keep all reviews in the house, and I thought the book had to be reviewed, and so did my senior editor. (With whom I had to consult weekly regarding my choice of books for review.) I might add that it would be insane for a book review editor to be answerable to no one. I was saved again and again as a reviewer from sins of omission, rather than commission, by editors who knew more than I about one thing or another.

Either you or Dick Harwood has the history of the Washington Post badly muddled. This has nothing to do with me, or the issue you tax me with, and it is not for publication. But: there was a severe disjunction between the editorial policy of the Post under J.R. Wiggins' stewardship, and the meaning of the news regularly reported in our paper. It makes a fascinating study. Far from having the news controlled by editorial policy, it was as though the editor of the newspaper did not read the dispatches from Vietnam that appeared on his own front page. One of Ben Bradlee's first acts when he became editor, in 1965, was to send Ward Just to Saigon. Ward Just was brilliant, prescient, he saw what Halberstam had seen, and reported it (See To What End, Just's book, by Houghton, Mifflin.) It is that Wiggins insisted, in the face of the evidence developed by his paper's reporters, on ~~believing~~ believing the guff he heard from the White House and the Pentagon, that a ridiculous gulf opened up between news and opinion. But he never, never tinkered with the treatment of the news, or with the assignment of reporters. He was strictly an editorial page editor. Although he outranked Ben Bradlee, he scrupulously kept his authority apart from Bradlee's domain. That is to say, the portion of Harwood's article that you quote gives an accurate account of the opinions expressed on the editorial page, but has no relevance to the performance of any other part of the paper, which was ~~creditably~~ diligent, and in the case of national and international news coverage, very often inspired. In the case of the book review columns, I would hope they were just, intelligent, and that they left undone as seldom as possible what they ought to have done.

Please send me a tear-sheet of your article when it appears. It sounds as though you have some mighty questions to answer. It's good that you are asking them.

Respectfully,

Geoffrey Wolff