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The Times that tries men's souls

By Sander Vanocur

THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER. By Gay Talese. Illustrated. World. 555 pp. \$10.

I cannot claim to have approached the subject of this book in a mood of detachment. Eighteen of the most miserable months of my life were spent as a local reporter for *The New York Times*. It was during this period, 1954-55, that I first met Gay Talese. He was working in the sports department and, as I remember, getting nowhere. He was terribly bright and showed it; he wrote exceedingly well; and he was what us boys raised in the Middle West used to call a "snappy dresser." At that time, none of these qualities was very helpful to rapid advancement at the *Times* and it was apparent that Talese was not long for the *Times*.

But Talese has a problem and I suppose I have it, too — and it is probably shared by anyone who has ever worked for the *Times*. Even when we find it in error, or distorted, or just dishonest, we are reluctant, often unwilling, to judge the *Times* by those standards we use to measure other institutions, spiritual and temporal.

One personal example. When Talese was correcting the galley proofs for this book, he called me to check whether the facts I had given him in an interview were correctly set down. They were, with one important exception. Talese had written that I had resigned from the *Times*. I told him this was not right: I had been fired. "But look," he replied, "no one ever gets fired from the *Times*. They simply get moved farther and farther back in the newsroom where they die a slow death." I begged Talese to report what I had told him; the fact of being fired from the *Times* was something that would look good in my resumé. But he never corrected the mistake.

This incident, trivial though it may be, suggests that most of us have conditioned ourselves, or have been conditioned by the *Times*, to believe that the people who run it are above the baser instincts and struggles of human existence. Well, they are not. And that is what this book is about. Then why should anyone outside the field of journalism be interested in the petty jealousies, plots, counterplots and villains (there are no heroes) which Talese so vividly describes? Given the holier-than-thou attitudes that ooze out of the *Times* every day of the week, the discovery of this mare's nest is like seeing dirty linen hung out in a detergent factory.

But there is more to it. The men who have run the *Times* — Adolph Ochs; Arthur Hays Sulzberger, who married Ochs's daughter; Orvil Dryfoos, who married Arthur Hays Sulzberger's daughter; and now Sulzberger's son, Arthur O. (Punch) Sulzberger — are good and decent men. The members of this family do not run the *Times* primarily for profit (though profitable it is); they run it as a public service. (Continued on page 3)

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(Continued from page 1) *The Kingdom and the Power* is uniquely interesting for what it tells us about the men who compete for the owners' favor — in the hope that they in turn may be empowered to determine how this "public service" will be run.

The stakes are enormous. The power to influence men's lives. The gratification that comes from the knowledge that your newspaper is taken by those in high places in this country and elsewhere as Holy Writ. The sense that you are helping to shape history. Talese's book is about that struggle, or more specifically, its latest episode. It began with the death of Orvil Dryfoos, a gentle man, who died shortly after the settlement of the bitter and protracted New York printers' strike in 1963. It was foreordained that the new publisher would be a member of the family. Punch Sulzberger, then thirty-seven, was given the post. Shortly thereafter he too was surrounded by courtiers, seeking his favor in their pursuit of power.

The final struggle came down to two men: Clifton Daniel, the managing editor; and James Reston, for many years chief of the Washington bureau and the paper's leading columnist, who now bore the title of associate editor. Both ostensibly served under the executive editor, Turner Catledge, a Southerner of monumental charm and cunning.

In the strictest sense, Daniel, who had achieved national prestige by marrying Margaret Truman, had been Catledge's protégé, and he served him loyally. Reston served no one save the family, to whom he endeared

himself by his professional ability and by his unflinching capacity to see no distinction between the national interest and the interest of *The New York Times*, even when the two were not the same. Everyone played the same power game, pretty much the same way, but because Reston is a moral man with a touch of the preacher about him, his moves must have seemed to the family more disinterested than those of his competitors.

In the end, as Talese relates, Reston won, but not before a number of able men, the assistant managing editor, Abe Rosenthal; Tom Wicker, the Washington bureau chief (chosen by Reston as his successor); and James Greenfield, whom Daniel and Rosenthal had chosen to replace Wicker, had been wounded in a terrible struggle for power.

In a curious way Talese leaves one with the impression that the wrong side won. This is not to pass judgment on the personal character of Reston or Daniel or on those of their supporters. But when he was named executive editor, replacing Catledge, Reston brought to the running of *The New York Times* a philosophy, peculiar to powerful journalists who have spent too many years in Washington: the idea that it is the duty of the *Times* to be a part, along with the government, of the apparatus that runs the country. In this arrangement, the *Times* scolds, it criticizes, but it is rarely outraged. And those who do become outraged about what is going on in this country — as Tom Wicker often seems to be — soon lose favor with officials in high places, and in turn lose favor with the publisher, who

enjoys, from time to time, being consulted and flattered by those in high places.

It was Reston, after all, who on the eve of the Bay of Pigs persuaded Orvil Dryfoos to play down the Kennedy Administration's plan for the Cuban invasion, an act which prompted Kennedy to say later that had the *Times* printed all that it knew about the invasion, it might have forced him to cancel it.

One cannot be sure, but Talese seems to imply that Daniel and his ally Rosenthal, both of whom are responsible for the brighter look the *Times* has recently shown in certain sections, would have followed a different path: they might have avoided the notion, so pronounced in Washington, that newspapers, especially *The New York Times*, should be part of the system, reporting its workings, criticizing its judgments, but rarely if ever questioning its assumptions.

Reston is now in charge and Daniel serves under him. The hand of reconciliation has been offered to all by Reston, who is in so many ways a generous man. But the struggle for power will continue and in due course Reston himself will be challenged by younger men, perhaps by some whom he has nurtured and who were his allies in this struggle. What is remarkable is that, until this book was written, we had deluded ourselves into thinking this sort of thing did not go on at *The New York Times*. Thanks to Talese, the dirty linen is out there, flapping in the breeze, for all of us to see and to ponder.