

Farewell to Editor Ben Bradlee

EDITOR, From DI

responsence. And Bradlee's wife and former Post reporter, Sally Quinn, said she'd waited 18 years to repeat the deflating words he muttered over the cake at *her* farewell party: "Forgotten, but not gone."

Tom Wilkinson, assistant to the managing editor, told a story about sending a young reporter by Bradlee's office for a job interview. Wilkinson had stressed the man's fine qualifications, his education, his resume and his polite demeanor. "Echhhhh," was the first response out of Bradlee after the meeting. "Nothin' clanks when he walks."

"After that," said Wilkinson, "I knew a little bit more about what Ben was looking for."

Editorial Page Editor Meg Greenfield said, "Ben made The Post dangerous. . . . Think of all those pictures you've seen over the years of Bradlee getting out of a car in front of the courthouse. . . . Millions of

them. I don't think anyone, outside of [mobster] Frank Costello, has been there so often."

She held up a picture of Bradlee on the way to court in the ultimately successful fight to resume publishing the Pentagon Papers. "See, he's even covering his face à la Costello."

Style Editor Mary Hadar ran down a list of gaffes her section had put into print. Bradlee's "favorite White House guest list," she maintained, "included the names of two dead people." His favorite Style story, about the National Spelling Bee, "misspelled the name of the winner." And his favorite Style headline (from a food story): "You Can Put Pickles Up Yourself."

Publisher Don Graham cheered Bradlee's "verve and guts and zest for the big story" and the little story. . . . and the determination to get the best reporters and editors and photographers to join him."

At 5 p.m.—one hour into the remarks—Bradlee shouted in exasper-

ation: "When are we going to put the paper out, guys?"

Three telegrams from foreign correspondents were read. One from Nora Boustany in Beirut:

"Whenever I found myself alone in the streets of Beirut, I would just shrug off the shelling, the gunnaten, and the dark corners. Telling myself there is a distinguished eminence up there, who really understands the true meaning of courage in journalism, I always made it to my destination safely and with the story."

"I find myself in Beirut again," continued Boustany's telegram. "The streets are a little calmer now, but for me you will always be the grand, brave man of the news who watched over me, and always made me want to give just a little bit more. Thank you for giving us all something special to believe in. Your fan forever, Nora."

Then it was Bradlee's turn. "I was doing okay until Nora's telegram," he said. His remarks were brief and

praise-deflecting. "I am overwhelmed by you," he said to the hundreds assembled, "just as I have been since the day we met."

He turned to his successor, Leonard Downie, and told a story about facing a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors during perhaps the most difficult period of his reign—after reporter Janet Cooke was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for a series of stories which turned out to be fraudulent.

"There wasn't one picture of me that day," Bradlee said, "when the arm of Donald Graham wasn't wrapped around my shoulders. This is what I bequeath you, Len: The loyalty of the publisher."

The cheers finally died down. Cake waited to be eaten. Bradlee turned to a nearby reporter.

"You're a girl," he said. "Cut it."

Earlier, a crowd squeezed into the news conference room—lined the walls, sat on the floor—for Bradlee's last "budget meeting," when editors discuss the contents of the next day's paper. Entering the room, Bradlee threw a kiss—a very large

smack sound which he's perfected, no doubt, over the years.

Editors tried, once again, to get his attention . . . but this time with phony news stories mixed in with the real ones—and read deadpan. National editor Fred Barbash claimed that Fred Rogers—Mister Rogers—had been “arrested in his neighborhood.” He offered another fake, about a “team effort” science story which involved both the Big Bang theory and the ozone layer—two subjects which have been boring Bradlee for years.

In reading the day's foreign news, editor David Ignatius discussed a London story: “And a sad sign of the times, Turnbull & Asser [where Bradlee gets his shirts], has been acquired by Mattress Discounters.”

Style editor Hadar read a bogus bulletin from the art world, sure to pique Bradlee's prudish side: “National Gallery director J. Carter Brown has announced an upcoming exhibition, which he has curated himself . . . The Phalluses of Phoenicia.”

Downie officiated, making outrageous Bradlee-esque comments

throughout. During a discussion of a horrible disaster, he quipped a favorite putdown: “Who are these people anyway? Debutantes? Heiresses?”

Electronic noise-makers were also activated during the meeting. There were bomb sounds. There were bullet sounds (a flurry of them after the mention of Imelda Marcos). And, there were hand-held electronic gizmos that shouted expletives—none of them outside the Bradlee lexicon.

When it was over, distinguished editors from all sections—imitating Bradlee's trademark end-of-meeting gesture—wadded up their budgets into tight balls and pitched them at him.

At day's end, Bradlee prepared to leave with Quinn. The legendary editor walked through the newsroom—which he designed, and staffed, and where he has worked for two decades. A standing ovation sprang up. Waves of applause followed him on his journey to the elevators. He raised his fist in the air. He smiled. He said “thanks.”

And walking past the reporter covering his farewell for the Style section: “I'm offering cash for you not to write that story.”