# With Panache, Bradlee Molded a Bolder, Brasher Post

By Howard Kurtz
Washington Post Staff Writer

In 1967, two years after Benjamin C. Bradlee became managing editor of The Washington Post, he learned that President Lyndon B. Johnson planned to appoint Walter E. Washington as the city's first mayor.

Bradlee got the tip from a longtime senior editor, Ben Gilbert, who was close to Washington and would later join his staff. Gilbert insisted the information could not be printed because any disclosure might make the mercurial Johnson change his mind. But after a reporter confirmed the story, Bradlee ordered it published without telling Gilbert—and then had city editor Stephen Isaacs swipe the paper's first edition, which was delivered to Gilbert's doorstep late every evening.

"Some at the old Post enjoyed cozy relationships with powerful people but Bradlee wasn't interested in that," said Robert G. Kaiser, now deputy managing editor.

During Bradlee's 26 years as managing editor and executive editor, he transformed a small, genteel paper with no national pretensions into what is widely regarded as one of the two or three most influential papers in the country. In the process he gained international fame and left an indelible mark on the news business.

Even as Bradlee has gradually reduced his role in the newsroom in recent years, his personality and approach to journalism—hard-hitting, sharp-tongued, and stylish—have remained interchangeable with the paper's public image.

Under Bradlee, 69, who announced his retirement as executive editor yesterday, The Post became larger and more profitable, bolder and brasher, blanketing big stories from Watergate to Iran-contra and, to its discomfort, sometimes becoming part of the story itself. The spotlight felt particularly uncomfortable when the paper made a mistake, or was seen as too prosecutorial, or too frivolous.

Bill Monroe, editor of the Washington Journalism Review, said The Post is "a brilliant, erratic paper. I don't think it has the solidity and predictability of the New York Times, but it's got a life, a vitality that the Times and other papers don't have. . . . There's a zest to Bradlee's approach."

Ben Bagdikian, a former Post national editor, said that "sometimes you wished Ben would pay a little bit more attention to things that were not jazzy or quick. His famous short attention span was a disadvantage sometimes. But it was also an advantage; he had a quick ear for dull stories."

Critics inside and outside the newsroom say the paper has grown more cautious in recent years, particularly on racial matters. The Washington Monthly has accused The Post of not being tough enough on former mayor Marion Barry before his drug arrest, while the New Republic called the paper "hypersensitive about race" in its coverage of the May disturbances in Mount Pleasant.

Bradlee has presided over an era of dramatic growth at The Post since 1965. The size of the newsroom staff doubled to 600. The news budget increased from $3 million to $60 million. Daily circulation rose from 446,000 to 802,000. The paper also won 23 Pulitzer Prizes during that time.

Colleagues said Bradlee's most important contribution has been his dogged refusal to allow powerful people to bully his reporters. Richard Harwood, one of Bradlee's first hires, said that when Sen. John L. McClellan (D-Ark.) once complained about a tough story Harwood had written, Bradlee told colleagues the senator could perform an unnatural act on himself.

"That set the tone for me. . . . He wasn't going to play footsie with the pols," said Harwood, now The Post's ombudsman.

A gruff and gregarious man, Bradlee cultivates what one editor called a "bad-ass" image, whether giving picketers an obscene gesture with his middle finger during labor strife at the paper or hanging the original metal type from the paper's "Nixon Resigns" front page to decorate a new editors' conference room.

Bradlee seemed to prefer sarcastic one-liners and brief, pointed critiques to lengthy discussions with subordinates. He displayed little interest in suburban news or incremental science stories. Once, he brought a toy siren at editors' conferences to ridicule stories he considered dull or too complicated. But he came alive in a crisis.

"Once in a very great while he would say something to you directly," said William Greider, a former reporter and now national editor at Rolling Stone. "It would be three words, like, 'Gee, that was a great [expletive] story.' Or he'd come by and slap you on the back and you knew the coach was pleased. When he was ticked off at us for blow-

ing something, he would just flick the lash and by God, you would get the message."

Using a style that Washington Post Co. Chairman Katharine Graham called "management by osmosis," Bradlee surrounded himself with talented people and gave them plenty of rope.

"I never did have a grand plan. . . . You'd be hard put to find an agenda, other than let's work hard and really do some new things and get some new people and be interesting and let's beware of the establishment," Bradlee said.

Yet Benjamin Crowninshield Bradlee himself hailed from the heart of the Boston Brahmin establishment, a Harvard graduate like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. A Navy veteran once described as having "the face of an international jewel thief," Bradlee helped start a New Hampshire newspaper in 1946, selling it two years later to become an $80-a-week police reporter at The Post.

Frustrated by his lack of progress, Bradlee quit in 1951 and became a press attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Paris. He signed on as a foreign correspondent with Newsweek in 1953 and was transferred to Washington four years later.

Bradlee became close to his new Georgetown neighbor, John F. Kennedy. That friendship brought Newsweek's Washington bureau chief plenty of exclusives after Kennedy won the presidency in 1960. But after Bradlee published a 1975 book about their friendship, "Conversations With Kennedy," some critics said he had gotten too close to a politician he covered. "If I was had," Bradlee wrote in the book, "so be it; I doubt I will ever be so close to a political figure again."

In 1961, Bradlee helped broker a 1961 deal for Post publisher Philip L. Graham to buy Newsweek. As a "finder's fee," Bradlee received Post stock that would help finance his 1983 purchase of a spacious Georgetown house as well as an 18th Century home in Southern Maryland that he and his wife have rennovated.

In 1965, Katharine Graham, who had taken over the Post Co. after her husband's suicide two years earlier, invited Bradlee to lunch at the F Street Club to discuss his future. He told her that if the managing editor's job at The Post ever became available, "I'd give my left one for it."

"He was pushing and pushing," Graham said. "It took a hell of a nerve, when he didn't have the job, to keep pushing like that. And then I thought, 'Maybe that's just what we need.' "

Bradlee's career at The Post can be divided into three phases. The first was building an institution; the second was adjusting to the burdens of fame and respectability that followed the paper's Watergate coverage. The final phase has been a seven-year transition to a younger generation of editors.

When Bradlee started in August 1965, The Post had been marginally profitable for only a few years. While a number of talented journalists worked there, it had the feel of a small-town paper. The lead story was often a wire service report. The front page might include a half-dozen stories that did not continue on an inside page, a one-paragraph item ("Nasser Daughter Weds in Cairo") and an ad for the classified section. The "For and About Women" section dealt with fashion and frothy features ("Luci Leads List of Proud Women at Historic Signing.") The business staff consisted of one reporter who wrote such stories as "Air Conditioning Sales Boom Here" and "Kay Opens Drugstore."

Bradlee rewrote leads, peppered the staff with notes and regularly stayed at the office past midnight. He encouraged longer pieces, filled with colorful inside details, that had long been the province of newsmagazines.

For his staff, Bradlee went after what he called "the best horseflesh around," luring such proven stars as Harwood, David S. Broder, Stanley Karnow, Nicholas Von Hoffman and Ward Just. "I once heard him say he felt the social context of reporters was important," Harwood said. "Several of his hires were Ivy League types and people with some money."

And, as on most papers, nearly all were white and male. By the time of the District's 1968 riot, The Post had only a half-dozen black reporters. In the early 1970s, blacks and women filed discrimination complaints against the paper. The Post today has one of the best minority hiring records among newspapers, according to industry figures, but has few blacks among its senior editors.

After Bradlee's arrival, the polite atmosphere that once characterized the newsroom turned sharply competitive. Some labeled this "creative tension" and a number of older reporters found it unsettling to be challenged by young upstarts.

Bradlee said he never espoused any philosophy called "creative tension." At the same time, he said, he was "shaking things up. . . . If there's no tension, everybody's sitting around fat and happy."

As Bradlee battled corporate officials to increase the newsroom budget, his trump card was Katharine Graham, with whom he had forged a close, teasing relationship.

"Everyone said I wouldn't get along with her. . . . I think she's a fabulous dame," Bradlee said. "I wouldn't have lasted 20 minutes anywhere else. I'd have blown my cork."

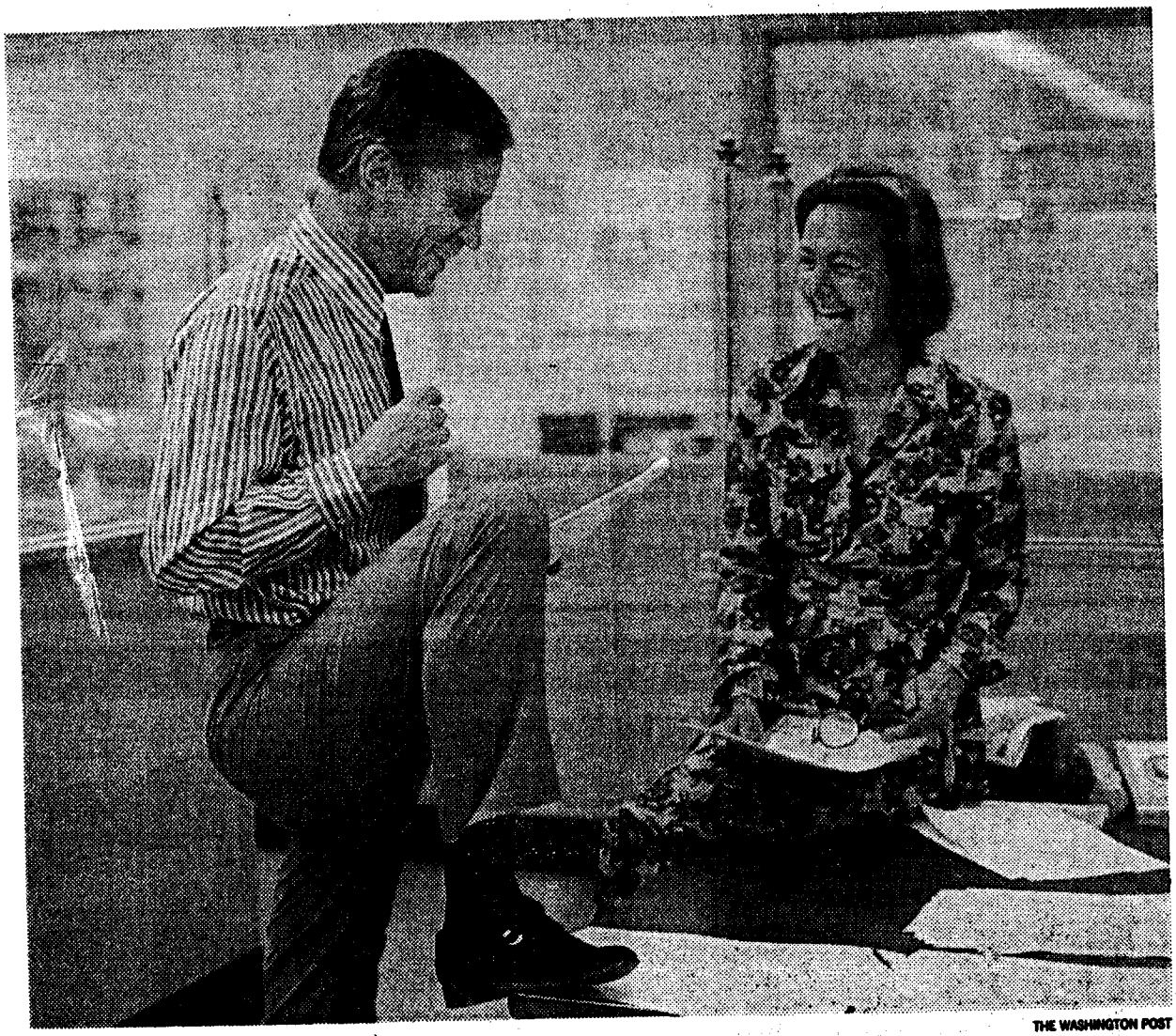
Graham said the two had their disagreements. "I can't edit this section unless you get your [expletive] finger out of my eye," Bradlee once told her.

During the years of urban unrest in the late 1960s, Bradlee did away with The Post's policy of covering up "near-misses," or racial incidents that might lead to a larger disturbance. When the 1968 riot erupted, Bradlee had a fierce shouting match with Ben Gilbert over a photograph of three grim-looking white men holding rifles to protect their shop against black looters. The picture ran on page one, though not as large as Bradlee wanted.

Determined to be apolitical, Bradlee refused to voice an opinion on the Vietnam War, even in the newsroom. He was more interested in improving the paper's coverage of the conflict. Peter Osnos, now a vice president at Random House, says Bradlee sent him to Saigon without ever asking his views.

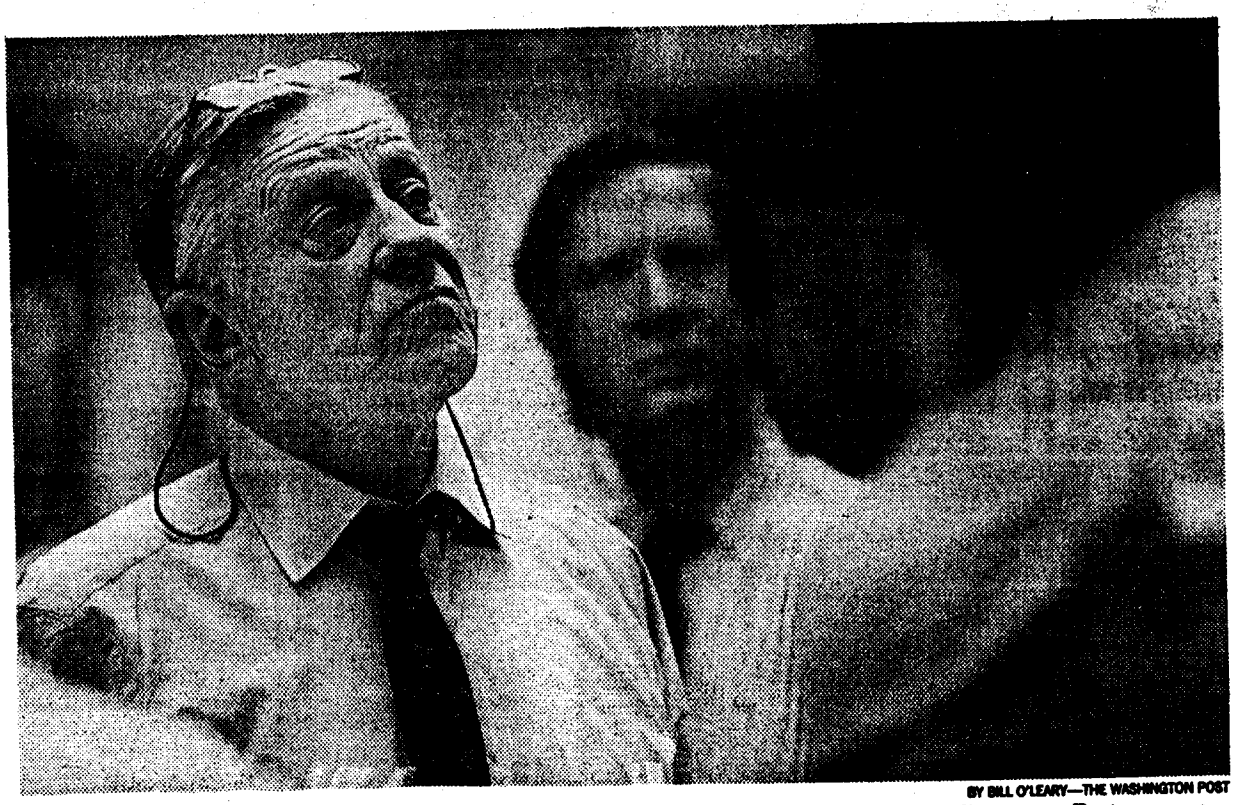
"There were no political litmus tests," Osnos said. "You went because you were willing to work flat out. That was what mattered. He never much liked whiners."

In 1969, shortly after succeeding J. Russell Wiggins as executive editor, Bradlee launched the Style section, an eclectic mix of flashy writing, scathing profiles, fashion, arts and entertainment coverage. While not universally acclaimed at first, the approach would be imitated in city



THE WASHINGTON POST

**Bradlee and Graham in the newsroom during the conflict between the press and government over the Pentagon Papers.**



BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

**In January, as a major news story breaks on war in the Persian Gulf, Bradlee confers with editors over Post coverage.**

after city.

Bradlee loved to boast of his rivalry with New York Times editor A.M. Rosenthal ("Eat your heart out, Abe!" he once proclaimed after The Post broke an exclusive story) and he was upset at being scooped when the Times began publishing the Pentagon Papers, a classified study of the Vietnam War, in 1971.

After the Nixon administration halted The Times's publication with a court order, The Post obtained its own copy, but the paper's lawyers argued against publication. The Washington Post Co. was about to issue its first public stock, and people tied to President Richard M. Nixon were challenging its Florida television licenses. After a dramatic meeting at Bradlee's house at which top staffers threatened to quit, Graham decided to publish the documents.

"That was the crucible for the team that emerged to run the paper," Bradlee said. "It made unnecessary all the tension you might have thought Watergate would bring. . . . There were no great all-night sessions on do you print this or that. Everybody trusted each other."

After the June 1972 break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate, The Post repeatedly published articles linking top aides of President Richard M. Nixon to a coverup scheme, even as most news organizations ignored the story. White House spokesman Ron Ziegler accused The Post of "the shabbiest journalistic techniques."

"There was no queston the whole company was riding on it," Graham said. "If we'd been wrong, it would have been disastrous. You sometimes wondered, if this was such a wonderful story, where was everyone else?"

"Sure you felt pressure," Bradlee said, "but it was just so exciting and so wonderful. You could not wait to get to work. . . . Faith just kept building that we were right and the cause was pure."

A year after Nixon's 1974 resignation, The Post was torn by a bitter strike in which the company broke the pressmen's union, which had staged a violent walkout. This period also marked the beginning of the second phase of Bradlee's career at The Post, one in which he relaxed his grip on the newsroom and began to enjoy his newfound fame, which was amplified when Jason Robards Jr. portrayed him in the Watergate movie, "All the President's Men."

Bradlee was often seen at glamorous Washington parties. He began a much-publicized office romance with Style writer Sally Quinn, and they were married in 1978. For staffers who were part of Bradlee's inner circle, there were coveted invitations to socialize at his house; others grumbled about feeling left out.

The paper found it harder to be quite so brash now that everyone was paying attention. "One of the ironies of The Washington Post and Bradlee is its great moment of triumph—namely Watergate—had the perverse effect of somehow making it more cautious," Greider said. "People took it much more seriously, and as a result the paper began taking itself more seriously."

Bradlee began elevating star reporters such as Bob Woodward to senior editing jobs. When Osnos became foreign editor and asked Bradlee what he needed to know, "He said, 'Be bold,' and that was it. . . . The transition to a group of young hard chargers with no management experience led to a shaky period."

That initial shakiness culminated with the greatest embarrassment of Bradlee's tenure: Janet Cooke's 1980 story about an 8-year-old heroin addict. Bradlee defended the report when city officials insisted it was a hoax, but learned otherwise after Cooke won a Pulitzer Prize and admitted, after questions were raised about her background, that she had fabricated the story. Ombudsman Bill Green faulted Bradlee and others for failing to ask hard questions.

Bradlee noted that he and other editors exposed the story as a fraud and immediately returned the prize. "There wasn't five seconds' worth of coverup," he said.

Other travails followed. Although Bradlee declared he would rather walk bare-assed down Pennsylvania Avenue than apologize to Jimmy Carter, the paper did apologize for a 1981 gossip item that proved false.

A particularly agonizing episode was the paper's lengthy and expensive defense in a libel suit by former Mobil Oil president William Tavoulareas, which placed its news-gathering methods under intense scrutiny. A jury in 1982 returned a $2 million verdict against The Post; the paper later won the case on appeal.

Bradlee's tenure moved into its third phase in 1984, when Leonard Downie Jr. became managing editor.

While Downie became the newsroom's dominant day-to-day figure, Bradlee still chose to make his influence felt on occasion.

One such episode occurred in 1985, when Bradlee repeatedly sparred with then-CIA Director William J. Casey, who threatened The Post with prosecution if it published a story about secret submarine eavesdropping. Bradlee approved the article after months of discussions, withholding some details he deemed unimportant, but by then NBC had aired part of the story first.

Times had changed. Woodward recalled in his book "Veil" that Bradlee had told him that "the political climate was very different from the 1970s. This is Reagan's government now, he said, and the presumption is

no longer that the airing of CIA secrets is automatically good."

Bradlee also got involved when racial controversies flared over Post coverage. After the paper was badly stung by a 1986 protest over two articles in its Sunday magazine that many blacks viewed as racially insensitive, Bradlee apologized.

Amid the frustrations of the last decade were many high points. The paper won seven Pulitzers, including one for Caryle Murphy's dispatches that were smuggled from occupied Kuwait last year. The Post also reported extensively on corruption in the Reagan administration and broke stories that played an important role in the resignation of House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) and Majority Whip Tony Coelho (D-Calif.)

For all his profane wisecracking, Bradlee often argued against media exposés of politicians' private lives. During the 1987 uproar over former senator Gary Hart's relationship with Donna Rice, Bradlee declined to publish the name of a Washington woman whom Hart had been seeing—a relationship that Bradlee himself had confirmed—although the paper's inquiry put additional pressure on Hart to drop out of the presidential race, as he did the next day. Bradlee said he did not want to ruin the woman's life.

When the Persian Gulf War began in January, it was clear that the editor's baton had been passed. Downie served as field commander, overseeing the deployment of reporters from Washington and from some of the paper's 17 foreign bureaus. Bradlee, who had inherited just three foreign bureaus in 1965, played the role of retired general.

"He's taken a lot of hits over the years, been the subject of a lot of gossip, done a lot of risky things," Harwood said. "And he's survived."