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Capitol Punishment

Will Success Spoil Reporter Burt Brillo?

By Art Buchwald

Something is happening in Washington. For the first time newspapermen are becoming more famous than the people they write about. I don't know if you can credit Spiro Agnew or the Nixon White House gang for the trend, but it's having a tremendous effect on the business, and some journalists are finding it difficult to handle their celebrity status.

As soon as Burt Brillo broke the story on the break-in of the Wesley Heights Taco Hut, he was besieged by other reporters wanting to do profiles on him. Brillo, who happened to be a police reporter at the time, achieved stardom overnight by discovering that the Taco Hut had been used by the CIA to feed their mid-night-to-8 a.m. shift. While this in itself would have been enough to make it a front-page story, a source whom Brillo has yet to name leaked the fact that two of the employees of the Taco Hut had entered the United States illegally from Mexico.

It was luck plus perseverance that made Brillo the most talked about man in Washington.

Besides getting a book contract to write the story of how he broke the story, Brillo was also signed for a lecture tour and was interviewed by Barbara Walters, Mike Douglas, Dinah Shore, Merv Griffin and Johnny Carson all on the same day.

Through his press agent I managed to get an interview with Burt in his ranch house overlooking Capitol Hill. The press agent warned me I could spend only 30 minutes with him as Women's Wear Daily was going to take

pictures at 5 o'clock.

I didn't know what to expect when I rang the doorbell, but I was pleasantly surprised to find Brillo a warm, sensitive human being who hadn't allowed all the adulation to go to his head.

We sat by the swimming pool and a Japanese manservant brought us gin and tonics.

"Most people," he said, "think that newspapermen are different. But actually I'm just like anyone else except I live better and pay more taxes. Sure, I was lucky in the Taco Hut break-in, but I find in this business you're only as good as your next story. That's why I'm being very careful what I choose for my next assignment. Oh, I've been offered lots of reporting jobs, but they're all junk—bank robberies, embezzlements, espionage trials and even a war or two. But I'm not about to rush into anything. I have to think of my future."

"Mr. Brillo, there was a rumor that Omar Sharif was going to play you in the movies. How do you feel about that?"

"Omar tried to buy the story, but I don't think he'd be right for it. I told the producers if they could get Al Pacino or Steve McQueen, I would be interested. I don't want to make the error Woodward and Bernstein did by having two nobodies like Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman portray them. Most police reporters make the mistake of selling their stories without casting approval."

"What's the toughest thing about being a successful newspaperman?" I asked.

"The lack of privacy. I can't go out to the store without being mobbed by my fans. Of course, they're the people who made me and I shouldn't complain, but sometimes I wish I was back to being just plain Burt Brillo again, covering the third police precinct on the lobster shift."

"I guess you're bothered by a lot of female admirers, too."

"What investigative reporter isn't? But after a while the thrill wears off and you wish you could find someone who would love you for yourself and not just because you're the author of the Taco Hut story."

A tall leggy blonde came over to us. "Mr. Brillo, your barber is here."

I apologized for keeping him so long.

Brillo gave me a wide toothy smile and a warm hand-clap.

"That's perfectly all right. I used to be a newspaperman myself."