

From the September / October 2002 issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*

Donald Graham's *Washington Post*

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

On October 1, 1975, at approximately 4:50 a.m., Donald Graham, heir apparent to *The Washington Post*, received a disturbing telephone call. Union members had just beaten a foreman, started a fire, and ransacked the presses at the *Post*.

Thus commenced a lengthy ordeal, during which helicopters landed on the roof of the *Post* to ferry pages to nonunion printing plants; waiters in tuxedos served snacks to workers inside the building; and some reporters who chose to work were harassed and beaten. One despairing pressman even committed suicide.

For Graham, who was thirty years old, the pressmen's strike was a baptism by fire. As assistant general manager during the strike, his job was to get the newspaper out each day without the craft unions, a task he performed with skill, brio, and humility: With a skeleton crew running the paper, the scion of a newspaper fortune was forced to load trucks and push rolls of newsprint. Toby Thompson, who went to prep school with Graham and wrote a searching profile of him in *Esquire* in 1985, quoted a colleague who recalled how, during the strike, Graham, who served in Vietnam, "just glowed — it was like combat duty and he was a commander in battle."

To his mother, Katharine Graham — who became known for her toughness during the strike — it was his moment of truth. "He was so helpful to me and so instrumental to the paper. I knew then that he was more than ready to take over as publisher," Mrs. Graham said in her 1997 memoir, *Personal History*.

In the years after the strike, Graham inherited *The Washington Post* and left a distinct imprint on it. By the time he relinquished the publisher's job in 2000, the *Post* was extraordinarily successful, both journalistically and financially, and Don Graham had begun to emerge from the long shadow of his mother. These days, as the cheerfully confident CEO of The Washington Post Company, Graham spends much of his time on matters pertaining to other parts of the company [see The Post Company's New Profile]. The *Post* is still very close to his heart, but the daily administration of it is now in the hands of one of his oldest friends, Bo Jones. Still, Graham remains deeply involved in the enterprise. For instance, Fred Hiatt, the editorial page editor, reports directly to Graham (and not to Jones, the publisher).

Not everyone, however, is enamored of the paper Graham fashioned in his own image. Even some people who know and admire him — almost all of whom insisted on anonymity — yearn for the scrappy, swashbuckling, incandescent *Post* of the 1970s, the *Post* that printed the Pentagon Papers and toppled Richard Nixon, the

Post that James Fallows — in an *Esquire* profile of Ben Bradlee in 1976 — hailed as “the most exciting paper to work on, the most interesting one to read, and the one from which wrongdoers had most to fear.” Kevin Phillips, the author and commentator, points out that both the *Post* and the rest of the world have changed. “The late sixties and early seventies was a period of political and institutional combat,” he says. “*The Washington Post* was part of that combat. I don’t think they’re part of any combat any more.”

Others point to a subtle transformation. Says the former *Post* reporter and editor Haynes Johnson: “It is a better overall paper today, though in my view not as brilliant or as exciting as the older model.” Listening to *Post* veterans analyze and assess the newspaper, one senses that something was irretrievably lost in the transition from Katharine Graham to Don Graham. “I look at those pictures of Ben and Mrs. Graham coming out of the courthouse, celebrating the news that they won the Pentagon Papers,” says Johnson. “Ben has his fist raised in exultation, and Kay is laughing like hell. That captured the spirit of the times better than anything.” And the single image that captures the *Post* now? Replies Johnson: “There isn’t one.”

If something was lost in the transition, perhaps something was gained, too. At a time when some large newspaper corporations have sacrificed journalistic quality for quarterly profits, the *Post*, under Don Graham, has maintained a rock-hard stability and a commitment to — and investment in — newsroom excellence. That his company, which went public in 1971, has delivered impressive financial results — particularly in the years after the pressmen’s strike — makes that independence and its outstanding journalism possible.

In 1972, Roger Wilkins went to work for *The Washington Post*. He was the first black editorial writer on the staff, and he would go on to write most of the *Post*’s editorials on Watergate. “One day,” Wilkins said recently, “this guy shows up at my door. He’s a big friendly guy with a big smile and he says” — Wilkins’s voice rises to a perfect imitation of Graham’s all-American cadence — “Hi, I’m Don Graham and I just want to welcome you to the paper and I just hope that you just have the best time here.’ Later I figured out who he was. But that was really nice, you know? Nice things like that do not normally happen in newspapers.”

Wilkins is not alone in his admiration for Graham. Gary Pruitt, CEO of The McClatchy Company, calls him “the class act of the newspaper industry.” Ralph Nader insists that he is “very congenial — a great person to have lunch with.” The veteran *Post* columnist Mary McGrory refers to him as “improbably virtuous and improbably humble — as decent a man as I’ve ever met in my life.”

McGrory recalls the illness and subsequent death of Meg Greenfield, the paper’s influential editorial page editor and an intimate friend of Katharine Graham. “When it was discovered that the cancer had spread to the brain,” McGrory relates, “she

happened to be in the West, and Don flew right out to see her. And he went to Johns Hopkins during her last illness and just sat in the room.”

Some *Post* reporters appreciate Graham’s handwritten notes about their stories, and his accessibility. Last year, Linda Perlstein, who covers education from one of the paper’s suburban bureaus, heard that Graham would be attending a public function near her office, so she invited him to stop by; he had never seen the bureau’s new offices. He replied instantly and affirmatively. Notes Perlstein: “How many Fortune 500 CEOs can you e-mail and have them reply in five minutes?” Longtime *Post* watchers praise Graham for his lack of pretense and pomposity. “He pays no attention to the starfucking culture that Katharine Graham was enamored of,” says the Slate columnist Jack Shafer. “I mean, imagine Truman Capote throwing a party for Donald Graham!”

His modesty can be disarming. Graham has a deep interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature, and in 1995 he gave the keynote address to the Trollope Society, which he did with grace and style. “Trollope’s ghost has had an awful year,” he began. “First, the House of Commons voted to outlaw fox hunting. Now this Society, in which the ghost must take great pride, gets lectured to by a figure who represents an unspeakable combination — an American, journalist and businessman — me.”

Yet Graham can be rather feisty as well. In 1995, *The New Republic* ran a thirteen-thousand-word article by Ruth Shalit about alleged racial tension in the *Post* newsroom, which prompted an acidic letter from Graham himself. “Since she works at The New Republic,” Graham’s letter stated, “the last practitioner of de facto segregation since Mississippi changed, Ms. Shalit has little or no experience in working with black colleagues.” (Graham noted that the magazine, founded in the early part of the century, has “never had a full-time black staffer” and quipped: “Motto: Looking for a qualified black since 1914.”)

Graham, however, plays most of his hardball as a businessman. In the early 1990s The Washington Post Company competed for cellular phone licenses through one of its subsidiaries [for all Washington Post Company holdings, see CJR’s Who Owns What]. The FCC had promised that the licenses would be free, but subsequent political wrangling overturned that ruling. Graham is still furious: “We thought this was a simple outrage,” he says today. On September 29, 1994, the *Post* editorialized in favor of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade treaty (GATT), and noted that the bill contained “no surprises.” But there was a surprise: deep in the GATT legislation was a provision that, competitors complained, would guarantee lucrative licenses to the Post company. Rival companies blasted the *Post* in full-page advertisements, and it was soon revealed that Donald Graham himself had lobbied at least one senator, along with the Clinton administration, for the GATT provision involving his company.

Mea culpas soon appeared in the newspaper, and the *Post's* ombudsman wrote on October 9, 1994, that the controversy was “a heavy blow to the newspaper’s credibility.” Shortly thereafter, the *Post* relinquished its cell-phone holdings. The contours of this affair remain opaque even today — although Graham does admit now, “I undoubtedly asked Senator John Danforth to include this provision in the bill.” Graham continues: “In hindsight, there should have been an editorial that mentioned this provision in the GATT treaty. We clearly should have done that.” But he also says, “We run a business and make no apologies for the fact that we try to run it well.”

His father, Philip Graham, was a man who relished the corridors and cloakrooms of power. A graduate of Harvard Law School, Graham came to Washington in the early 1940s, one of the brilliant young New Dealers who surrounded Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. He married Katharine and inherited *The Washington Post* from her father, Eugene Meyer, who bought it in a 1933 bankruptcy sale. Philip transformed the paper into a solid — if hardly superlative — daily. Perhaps his greatest achievement was the 1954 purchase of the only remaining morning competitor, the Times-Herald, which gave the *Post* a near a.m. monopoly. By 1960 it was the top paper in Washington.

From the very start, his first son, Donald, born in 1945, exhibited few of his father’s personal and political characteristics. When Philip turned thirty, Eugene Meyer sent a stunningly prescient letter to him: the infant Don is “calm and quiet, and seems to be balanced in a sort of judicial manner,” Meyer wrote. “I don’t think anybody is going to get him excited if he can help it If you think he is going to be a torch bearer for any of the isms that you want to hand him or try to instill in him, I feel it my duty to tell you I think you are going to be disappointed.”

In the late fifties and early sixties, Phil’s mental health — he suffered from manic depression — began to deteriorate. In August 1963, with his wife in a nearby room, he shot and killed himself. In memoriam, the *Washington Daily News* printed the poem “Richard Cory” by Edwin Arlington Robinson, about a man who “was a gentleman from sole to crown/clean favored and imperially slim,” a man who “fluttered pulses when he said, ‘Good Morning,’” a man who, “one calm summer night/went home and put a bullet through his head.”

Don Graham was eighteen.

Phil’s descent left Katharine in a state of despondency, and she took refuge in friendships. It was James Reston, the columnist, who remarked to her, in the difficult months preceding Phil’s suicide, that “you and I can’t do anything about Phil, but we can start training Donny, and I would like to take him as my clerk this summer.” It was the summer of Phil’s death, when Don was a sophomore at Harvard. He would grow up to be a man quite unlike his father, a man who doesn’t drink, smoke, chase women, or advise politicians, a man who, friends say, carried a heavy emotional

burden throughout his early career. Esquire quoted his younger brother Steve as saying of Don: "I don't know why he hasn't jumped out of a window."

At Harvard, Graham gravitated toward the Harvard Crimson, where he was elected president in 1965. The insurrectionary spirit of the sixties had come to Harvard, but Graham's circle was, to a certain extent, immune to it. The *Post* reporter Jay Mathews, who was also at the Crimson, notes that Graham was presented with a "live baby hawk at the annual Crimson dinner Don's senior year, a token of our affectionate recognition that he had kept the Crimson on the pro-war side of that debate much longer than most of us were comfortable with."

But Graham was not an armchair warrior. In 1966 he volunteered for the draft and in 1967 the Army sent him to South Vietnam, where he worked as an information officer, a military journalist, and witnessed the end of the battle of Khe Sahn in 1968.

Graham would always take enormous pride in his military service. Haynes Johnson has vivid memories of luncheons in Mrs. Graham's dining room in the early 1970s, occasions where prominent government officials and journalists would mingle, and where Don would forcefully inquire about the military service of his peers. Recalls Johnson: "Don would always have some questions for people his age. What did they do at that time? Did they serve? And if they didn't serve — why not?"

In 1968, Graham returned from Southeast Asia to a nation enveloped by discord. In the first six months of 1969, there were three hundred major protest demonstrations at colleges and universities, involving a third of the nation's students, along with eighty-four bombings and arson incidents. Like many in his generation, Graham mounted the barricades, but not as an anti-Vietnam protester. He chose order over chaos. In January 1969 he joined the Washington Metropolitan Police Department as a patrolman.

He was sent to what was then the Ninth Precinct in Northeast Washington, a zone that was heavily damaged in the riots of 1968, a zone full of poverty, drugs, vice, and despair. "Everyone knew that he was Katharine Graham's son," says Ike Fulwood, who served in a nearby precinct and later rose to the head of the D.C. police force, "so that made for some interesting conversation." Fulwood remembers him as "a pretty good police officer" — a "guy who talked to people, communicated with them very well." Graham made some friends in the neighborhood: Many years later, the *Post* staffer Katherine Boo would report from the same precinct, and be duly informed by gap-toothed old ladies: "You better get the facts right, or I'll tell Donny!"

Graham arrived at the *Post* in 1971, where he was a general-assignment reporter and wrote some book reviews. He did a brief stint at *Newsweek*, and spent a blissful year as the *Post*'s sports editor. In 1974 he was elected a director of The Washington Post Company. Graham was not unaware of the labor trouble within the newspaper; it was a matter of great concern within the Graham family for years.

In October 1975, after the pressroom was ransacked, the unions walked out. But the striking pressmen soon received an ugly surprise: *Post* management had prepared nonunion employees at special training facilities in Oklahoma, Miami, and Washington, and within one day, produced a paper with nonunion labor. In the end, management refused to buckle, permanent replacements were brought in, and most of the pressmen lost their jobs. The union was broken.

Asked about the strike recently, Don Graham replied: "It never should have occurred." In two long conversations with CJR, Graham was mostly cheerful and relaxed (and guarded) — until the matter of the strike came up, at which point a rough edge entered his voice: "I was told that the Harvard Business School taught a case on that strike for a number of years in their labor relations course," he explains. "They dropped it because in a special program they conducted on labor relations involving management and union participants, the union people objected that the union behavior in *The Washington Post* pressmen's strike was so bizarre, so wildly atypical of normal union behavior, that it would mislead business students and management representatives about the nature of unions."

Other people have a different view. *Esquire's* Thompson quoted a former *Post* national editor, Ben Bagdikian, as saying: "The pressmen were stupid, but the paper was deliberately goading them. It was trying to break the union — I don't think there was any question about that." Bagdikian, who brought the Pentagon Papers to the *Post* and thereby produced the second biggest story in the paper's history, still feels that way today.

Twenty-seven years later, labor trouble persists at the *Post*, although the remaining unions are weak. In June, to coincide with the paper's 125th anniversary, reporters associated with The Newspaper Guild, which has eight hundred members at the *Post*, launched a byline strike to protest a breakdown in contract negotiations. Nearly every reporter complied. "I think Don, overall, is the best newspaper publisher in America, as his mother was before him," says the *Post* reporter and union activist Peter Perl. "Unfortunately, I think they also shared a blind spot about labor unions following the 1975 strike and are still fighting that battle, which is demoralizing to those of us who love working at the *Post*."

What's clear is that the newspaper, and the company, prospered in the years after the 1975 strike. "While the *Post* was hurt for a time," Howard Bray wrote in his 1980 book, *The Pillars of the Post*, "the strike in the long run was actually a bonanza for the company." In her co-authored introduction to the Post Company's 1977 annual report, Katharine Graham gushed, "The return on shareholders' equity was the best in our history, twenty-five percent for the year. Our financial position has never been stronger."

As publisher, Graham, to an overwhelming extent, concentrated his efforts on building the *Post's* local circulation. Not everyone welcomed that focus; some employees lamented his unwillingness to expand nationally. "He would not, to our frustration, create a daily national edition," says Haynes Johnson. But Johnson is glad that "the *Post* is even more rooted in its local community than it was when I first came there" in 1969.

Graham himself has no regrets. He claims the current circulation strategy goes all the way back to the 1950s, when *Post* circulation executives were, in his words, "aggressively looking for readers not only in the city of Washington, and not only in the immediately surrounding suburbs, but thirty, forty, fifty miles beyond on the assumption that would one day be part of the Washington area." It's a strategy that has paid off: the *Post* has one of the highest local penetration rates of any daily in the United States. Says Graham: "*The Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*, which are sensational papers, have about twenty percent penetration in their home counties, in L.A. county and Cook county. The *Post* is more than twice that in eleven counties and the District of Columbia."

The *Post* has benefited from a wide variety of geographical, historical and economic factors. The Washington, D.C., area, according to Graham, is "a hell of an area to publish a newspaper in" — especially, he might have added, in the years following 1981, when the *Washington Star*, the paper's main competitor, folded. Says newspaper analyst John Morton, "Washington is probably the best newspaper market in the country." In an attempt to fully conquer that market, the *Post* now produces ten weekly zoned supplements (known as "extras"); and in 1992 the company purchased the Gazette Newspapers, a chain of free suburban weeklies. A lax regulatory climate made that kind of acquisition possible. Says John Morton: "Twenty years ago the Justice Department would never have allowed the *Post* to buy up those suburban papers."

On the editorial front, some people think that the *Post's* efforts on behalf of local coverage have paid off handsomely. "The *Post* is very well manned and covers state politics for two states and one very enormous city," says Slate's Shafer. "I give them as good a mark or better than any metropolitan paper in the country. The paper's metro section is probably stronger than it has been for a long time." Others disagree. Harry Jaffe, who pens the "Post Watch" column for *Washingtonian* magazine and is the co-author of *Dream City: Race, Power, and the Decline of Washington, D.C.*, insists that the *Post* "is getting killed by *The Washington Times* on a daily basis. The *Times* covers the local politics of the District of Columbia on a day-to-day basis much better than the *Post*. The *Post* covers it when it feels like it." Interestingly, Ben Bradlee himself does not entirely disagree with Jaffe's view. Asked how serious a competitor *The Washington Times* has been on local coverage, Bradlee, who at the age of eighty-one holds the title of vice president at large at the *Post*, replies: "I think it may be more serious than we think it is. I see them get some local stories that I think the *Post* doesn't have and should have had."

Between 1979 and 1983, Graham was forced to confront a number of newsroom crises as publisher. There was the Janet Cooke affair, in which a *Post* reporter concocted a tale of an eight-year-old heroin addict named “Jimmy”; there was the Tavoulareas case, in which the *Post* was sued by the president of Mobil after the paper reported that he used the company to set up his son in business; and there was at least one instance in which the newspaper had to publicly apologize for the work of a reporter. People who know Graham say that these events made a cautious man even more cautious. For Graham, the Janet Cooke affair was especially traumatic. His initial response was to defend the piece unequivocally when readers argued that it was surely fictional and demanded that the paper produce the child. On October 7, 1980, shortly after the Cooke piece ran and months before it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, Graham sent a note to Janet Cooke. It appears in Tom Kelly’s 1983 book *The Imperial Post*:

With all the turmoil of the last weeks, it’s important that one say the basic thing: not only was that a very fine story in Sunday’s paper a week ago, it was only one of many you’ve done in the last year. The *Post* has no more important and tougher job than explaining life in the black community in Washington. A special burden gets put on black reporters doing that job and a double-special burden on black reporters who try to see life with their own eyes instead of seeing it the way they’re told they should. The *Post* seems to have many such reporters. You belong very high up among them . . . And you went through your tests of last week with what seemed to me world class composure. Sincerely, Don

Friends say he died a thousand deaths over her subsequent exposure. “Of course he did,” says Ben Bradlee. “You think any of us didn’t?”

In the wake of the Cooke affair, some *Post* staff members say, Graham took steps to lower the temperature of the newspaper — a process that, to a certain extent, had been taking place since Watergate — and top staff people expressed dissatisfaction. In 1985, Bob Woodward grumbled to *Esquire* that Graham’s efforts had served to “calm down the paper editorially. He’s uncomfortable with stories like Watergate.” When Graham became publisher in 1979, Bradlee submitted his resignation, arguing that the publisher should appoint his own editor. Graham kept Bradlee in the top job until 1991. But he also groomed Leonard Downie as Bradlee’s successor, even though Bradlee himself wanted a very different kind of man to follow him: the future Los Angeles Times editor, Shelby Coffey. Many people inside the newsroom felt that Coffey, who had been a top *Post* editor, could have brought a Bradlee-like élan and panache to the newspaper.

At the time, people noted a powerful chemistry between Graham and Downie. “There is a strange, mutual attraction between the two of them,” the late Herbert Denton, one of Graham’s closest friends, told the *Washingtonian* in 1992. “They

communicated so well, it was almost wordless at times.” Downie, who became executive editor in 1991, was (and is) a steady, solid, hard-working newspaperman who helped to edit the *Post*’s Watergate coverage, and rose through the ranks of the Metro section. He was always passionate about investigative reporting, and in 1976 he published a book entitled *The New Muckrakers*.

The book consisted of lively profiles of writers like Seymour Hersh, I.F. Stone, and Donald Barlett and James Steele, and it glowed with an idealism and headiness typical of the post-Watergate period. In it, Downie approvingly quoted the *London Sunday Times* editor, Harold Evans: “We can create an agenda for society.” The *New Muckrakers* concluded with a ringing affirmation: “There is no reason . . . for the press to make any post-Watergate reconciliation with government by abandoning its present adversary posture.”

The man whom Don Graham chose to replace Ben Bradlee mellowed considerably during the Reagan years. In a 1992 column, Downie explained, in the context of the paper’s endorsement of Bill Clinton, that journalists are people who “cannot be expected to completely cleanse their professional minds of human emotions and opinions,” but that the *Post* wanted its reporters and editors to “come as close as possible to doing just that.” Downie added: “In the most extreme effort of this kind, I no longer exercise my right to vote.”

It must be said that Graham and Downie have put out an excellent newspaper. Top-notch articles appear in the *Post* virtually every day, and the paper has garnered numerous prizes, including thirteen Pulitzers. The *Post* does superb investigative work (most notably on police misconduct), and the news pages are still infused with sympathy for the underdog. For instance, the paper’s front page for August 6 contained no less than three powerful stories — on the impoverishment of Argentina’s working class, on the suffering of civilians in the West Bank, and on the displacement of immigrant workers in the U.S. — with a strong social justice angle. The *Post* was justifiably applauded (and awarded) for its sweeping, expansive coverage of September 11. The paper breaks important stories on a regular basis. The national reporting staff is first-rate; the foreign reporting shines; the sports pages are strong. There is much grumbling, however, about the Style section, which nevertheless continues to feature much superb writing.

Few doubt that Don Graham’s newspaper is very different from his mother’s. “Mrs. Graham brought gumption and serendipity to the job with her hires and how she dealt with confrontation,” says Harry Jaffe of the *Washingtonian*, who has been observing the *Post* for twenty-five years. “Don Graham is just more of a collected individual. He measures everything. And I think that really shows with the newspaper that he publishes. *The Washington Post* newsroom is kind of a deadened place now.” Says Henry Allen, a Style editor: “The atmosphere in the newsroom is the same as the atmosphere up in classified. People staring at computer screens.”

Such complaints are not unique to the *Post*, and it has to be noted that, in certain respects, the newsroom culture may have changed for the better. Downie's newsroom is less macho and elitist — and more egalitarian — than Bradlee's.

What does Bradlee himself think? Two years ago, in a conversation with *The New Yorker*, he let his guard down and remarked that Graham “just doesn't like controversy.” In a recent chat with CJR, he was much more circumspect, but he did allow: “I worry about the cumulative effect of being a near-monopoly paper. I don't think people work as hard as we all used to. I really don't. You can swing a cat around that place in weekends and sometimes not hit anybody.”

Such is the power of Don Graham and *The Washington Post* that, of the sixty people contacted for this article, only a handful would assess the strengths and weaknesses of Graham's newspaper. One who did is longtime *Post*-watcher Ralph Nader, who is full of admiration for the *Post*'s long investigative features and who says that “they do some very good work in the ‘A’ section.” But Nader does detect a significant shift in the reporting in the Graham era: “When you do a feature, you turn the newspaper into a magazine,” says Nader. “Reporting means that you report on an evolving issue and all the players — like they did on auto safety when I was going after General Motors and there were congressional hearings and legislation. They stayed with the story. Therefore, they made it happen. They don't do that anymore.”

Downie takes issue with Nader. “I think the newspaper's been full of edgy coverage of all different kinds in recent years — locally, nationally, internationally.” And he insists that the *Post* does stick with key stories: “David Hilzenrath is the only newspaper reporter in the U.S. to do a series of articles demonstrating the problems in the accounting industry before all hell broke loose — the only reporter. It was out there all by itself. No other media picked it up. It was Ralph Naderish, if you will. We stuck with that.” Downie continues, “What we don't do is select particular issues, decide what we want the outcome to be, and then pursue that, which sometimes Ralph would like us to do, because that's what he does. And I understand that.” Gone, for better or worse, is the fiery young man who, two years after Watergate, believed, along with Harold Evans, that “we can create an agenda for society.”

Along with Nader, a few *Post* veterans did volunteer their candid opinions. Says Haynes Johnson: “The *Post* seems to me, in recent years, to have become more and more conservative.”

The *Post*'s editorial pages are a source of much dissatisfaction among many *Post*-watchers. At his mother's urging, one of Don Graham's first and most important acts as publisher was to remove the longtime editorial page editor, Philip Geyelin, who was a solid liberal, and replace him with Meg Greenfield, a maverick with strong neoconservative leanings. Many observers say the pages have been drifting right ever since. In October 2001, the former *Post* editorial writer and syndicated columnist Colman McCarthy published a scathing article in *The Progressive* entitled

“Why the *Washington Post* Op-Ed Page is So Dull.” McCarthy monitored the *Post* op-ed page daily for three months, and concluded that “it is a sheet of numbing sameness: centrist or rightwing viewpoints, listless writing, and pro-establishment megaphonics.” Friends say that Graham has grown increasingly conservative in recent years, and that the op-ed page — which features Robert Novak, Charles Krauthammer, and George Will as regular columnists — is not inconsistent with his own views. What is clear is that it’s a page in which conservative voices are very strong and liberal voices are very weak.

Asked for his opinion of the *Progressive* piece, Hiatt replies mildly, “I don’t remember the piece well enough to give you a general response.” But he does take the opportunity to announce the latest addition to the *Post*’s editorial board — the gifted (and conservative) writer Anne Applebaum, whose work has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Spectator*, and *The Daily Telegraph*, and who will join the paper in October. Hiatt does have his fans, though. “I think Fred Hiatt will be one of the best appointments of Don Graham’s tenure,” says Jaffe of *The Washingtonian*.

If the *Post* became more politically conservative under Don Graham, to a certain extent it also became more stylistically adventurous. The paper is extremely well written and edited. One morning a few weeks ago, Graham was excited about a long front-page story by the *Post*’s China correspondent, Philip Pan, which he called “astonishing.” Pan’s story chronicled a group of construction workers in Shenzhen, who filed a lawsuit against a state-owned employer that had robbed them of their pensions. In tone and texture, in the way in which the author chronicled a shift in his subjects’ political consciousness, Pan’s piece was closer to a magazine article than a newspaper story — a fact that is true for much of the best writing in the *Post*. On July 25, Philip Kennicott wrote an article entitled “A Window On the Mind of Moussaoui,” which argued that his legal documents constitute an “autobiographical tract” written in legalese. “It is a document of a mind and a man facing death and afraid of dishonor, sometimes rambling and discursive, yet with threads of logic and flashes of brilliance.” Graham cares about good writing, and his newspaper is setting high standards for it.

Still, despite Graham and Downie’s best efforts, the long shadow of Ben Bradlee hangs over *The Washington Post*. Adds Jaffe: “It’s still a great newspaper and it still has great reporters. Len is a good editor and is deservedly tired of being measured against Ben Bradlee. But that’s like saying let’s talk about the United States and forget about the Civil War.” Ben Bagdikian recalls: “Bradlee wanted something lively every single day. He used to say at editorial meetings, ‘I want people to pick up this fucking paper every morning and look at it and say holy shit!’” “Downie heeds the Grahams very, very loyally,” says Ralph Nader. “He doesn’t stretch them. I think Bradlee stretched the Grahams. Leonard reflects the Grahams.”

In 1970 Bradlee wrote the foreword to a collection of essays by one of his writers, Nicholas von Hoffman, who was an outrageous provocateur during his ten-year stay

at *The Washington Post*. Von Hoffman never went to college; he worked in the Chicago stockyards and later served as a political organizer for the community activist Saul Alinsky; Bradlee hired him from the *Chicago Daily News*. He was a brilliant reporter, and also wrote an incendiary column for the Style section. In her memoirs, Mrs. Graham wrote: "My life would have been a lot simpler had Nicholas von Hoffman not appeared in the paper." But, to her credit, she added that "I firmly believed that he belonged at the *Post*." In his foreword, Bradlee compared him to H.L. Mencken and wrote:

The columns that follow first appeared in *The Washington Post*. They are not for everyone — not for those who feel that all's right with the world, not for those whose cows are sacred, and surely not for those who fear the violent contradictions of our time. Rather they are for those who agree with Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., that it is "required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his times at peril of being judged not to have lived."

It's a beautiful paragraph, full of verve, adventurousness, and soul — qualities that many people feel were abundant in Katharine Graham's *Post*, and lacking in her son's. These days, there are no Menckens or von Hoffmans at the *Post*, and Bradlee himself is an ornament. Now, when people talk about innovative voices at the *Post*, they refer most frequently to the thirty-four-year-old Style writer Hank Stuever — a significant talent, certainly, but no von Hoffman.

Von Hoffman himself has a clear-eyed sense of what happened to his old newspaper under Don Graham's tenure. He lives in Maine now, and remains a journalistic gadfly. He writes an abrasive biweekly column for *The New York Observer*. Von Hoffman points to larger shifts in the newspaper business: "The *Post* can no longer be an instrument of a particular person's mentality, or politics, or whatever. It has to keep in mind at all times those stockholders. You have to see the *Post* in the shape of the rest of the industry. It's very difficult to deviate.

"It has the problems that newspapers have, although to a lesser extent, because it still has this vast number of government workers who go down to the office every day and have nothing to do but sip coffee and read the paper. I always thought that gave the *Post* an unfair advantage over other newspapers."

In his view, the quality has held steady: "I read the *Post* from time to time and it's an eminently respectable newspaper." And he is not unkind toward the current editor, Leonard Downie. "Downie makes absolutely good sense for this era. He's a decent guy — he really is a decent guy — and he is a hard worker. He has ethics; he truly does. He is concerned about the news business. But, to use an idiom of the moment, he's 'in the box.' He's definitely within the box. But all of American journalism is within the box."

Von Hoffman notes that his *Post* was the product of a specific time and place, a time when a mass audience demanded eccentric, combative journalism; a time when

family-owned newspapers tolerated quirks and leaned toward the unconventional. And it was a time when society was in upheaval. Those days are gone. He offers a sobering thought: "If Ben Bradlee were forty years old today, he would not be hired as a major editor on any American newspaper. Period." When that question is put to Bradlee himself, he replies in an instant: "It could be true. If other things were equal, I think I might be hired at the *Post*."

Yet Don Graham's conservatism cuts in various directions. At a time when chains like Knight Ridder and Gannett have endeavored to squeeze every last dollar from their newspapers, Graham has quietly invested in the *Post*: building it, sustaining it, conserving it. The number of reporters and editors and bureaus has grown impressively during his tenure; despite years of unprofitability, he stuck with *The Washington Post Magazine*, and this year it finally approached profitability; despite continual losses, Book World, a first-rate operation, has been allowed to remain a stand-alone weekly section. Graham has been a consistent champion of the paper's fine (and money-losing) Web site. All this is in stark contrast to general trends in the newspaper industry.

To his credit, Graham has also supported the presence of an ombudsman, who files a weekly report on the editorial page. No such position exists at *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*.

Graham takes pride in his independence from Wall Street. (When the *Post* went public in 1971, the family retained the controlling votes.) "We have never done quarterly conference calls describing our earnings," Graham says. "We pay no attention to what Wall Street analysts are estimating we're going to make for the quarter. We don't particularly care what we're going to make for the quarter. And we have told them so." And he makes no apologies about investing in the newspaper: "You can look at the papers that invest the most in their newsrooms in the United States," says Graham, "and the business results aren't bad."

"Don's view is," says Gary Pruitt of McClatchy, "you get the shareholders you deserve. In other words, we don't want shareholders that are looking at quarterly results. We want ones that only look longer term." Says Jay Harris, the former publisher of the *San Jose Mercury News*: "In all of the years that I have watched Don, he has always put the public trust first."

A crucial test for a publisher is the extent to which he's willing to defend his own staff in times of distress. Patrick Tyler was the *Post* reporter who, in 1979, wrote the story about Mobil; the ensuing lawsuit dragged on for years, and ultimately cost the paper \$1.5 million. Tyler, who now writes for *The New York Times*, notes that the *Post* defended the suit "tenaciously, bringing in the best legal team money could buy."

“The day we lost the trial,” Tyler recalls, “Don Graham met me at the elevator to the fifth-floor newsroom and said, ‘I want to walk with you’ through the room to visibly show his support. Katharine gave me a bear hug that I will never forget. She almost cracked my ribs. I had thought my career was over, and so their determination to take the case all the way to the Supreme Court if necessary was one of the most singular acts of editorial courage in the face of a determined assault by a disingenuous corporate adversary that I had ever witnessed.”

Graham is not eager to discuss the question of succession at the *Post*; none of his four children work for the newspaper at present. Yet key steps have already been taken concerning succession within the newsroom: In 1998 Steve Coll was appointed managing editor; he is now the leading contender to replace Downie. Coll, who shared a Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism in 1990, is the author of four books, and in January 2000 he published a stunning ten-thousand-word dispatch from the nightmarish battleground of Sierra Leone in the paper’s Sunday magazine. No major newspaper editor has written a better piece in years. Many reporters admire him, and one suspects that Coll is a man who could, in a best-case scenario, bring things full circle by combining some of Bradlee’s panache with Downie’s solidity and steadiness. For his part, Ralph Nader admires Coll’s skill as an investigative reporter, and has high hopes for him in the future.

But the *Post*, like *The New York Times*, is destined to disappoint the Ralph Naders of the world. It is a profoundly centrist institution, given to glacial movements. In *The Kingdom and the Power*, his book on the *Times*, Gay Talese compared it to a “deep-rooted flexible tree that moved from left to right, right to left, making its quiet adjustments as it dropped its tired old leaves and rebloomed through a century of seasons.” Katharine Graham will be remembered for the Pentagon Papers and Watergate; one suspects that Don Graham will be remembered for preserving the franchise in an epoch of journalistic degradation and tawdry capitalist excess. He has trimmed the branches and kept the roots strong, making it possible for the tree to relinquish its tired old leaves and rebloom through the seasons.

Seth Stephens contributed research to this article.