

# 'Front Page' to Ferguson: A memoir of half a century of St. Louis journalism

As a rookie reporter at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch five decades ago, I sat directly in front of Ted Link, a Post-Dispatch legend.



Link never said a word to me. I never said a word to Link. But I looked up to him as one of those crusty veterans who had made the Post-Dispatch great.

One thing about Link unnerved me. Each morning, he walked to his desk, opened the bottom right drawer, took his gun from his gray suit and put it in the drawer. No one questioned whether Link had a good reason to carry a gun—the man wrote about the mob.

Link seemed a little dangerous. The police chief at the time, Eugene Camp, had told me Link should have been convicted for

killing his gardener, even though he beat the charge. A Jefferson County deputy added to the mystique telling me Link was so well-connected he once had filed a story on a mob killing before the killing. That's probably apocryphal but it gave new meaning to getting a scoop.

One of my early stories was about corruption in St. Louis' municipal court and the bail-bond system. Considering the municipal court corruption uncovered in Ferguson 40 years later, it seems big stories return every 30 or 40 years—like comets. It's also a reminder that injustice persists across lifetimes.

The municipal courts beat reporter, John J. Hynes, was a friend of Link's. Hynes, an intimidating presence at 6-foot-6, had covered the mob too after a stint with the CIA. Once, upset at a young rewrite man, Dana Spitzer, Hynes stalked down 12th St. and punched him out. When I found out Hynes was accepting bribes, such as TVs, from bail bondsmen, he was removed from the court beat. Link's friends made it clear Ted wasn't happy with me getting his friend demoted.

There were other instances when punches flew among reporters. One famous one was when the otherwise mild-mannered political reporter Fred Lindecke punched the Globe's John V. Colt in Jefferson City because Colt had broken the release time on a press release.

As the reader may have gathered, the Post-Dispatch newsroom of the 1970s was closer to "Front Page" than the modern newsroom with its computers and band of survivors breaking news on Twitter.

Link's heyday was a period when he and other reporters, such as Roy J. Harris, won five Public Service Pulitzer prizes during the 15 years between 1937 and 1952. The last of those Public Service Pulitzers was for Link's disclosure of "widespread corruption" in Truman's IRS.

Over a period of several decades, the paper also won Pulitzers for editorial cartoonists Daniel Fitzpatrick and Bill Mauldin, editorial writers Robert Lasch and Bart Howard and three Washington Bureau reporters—Paul Y. Anderson for his Teapot Dome disclosures, Charles G. Ross for his essay on the Great Depression, “The Plight of the Country” and Marquis Childs for his nationally published columns.

Has the Post-Dispatch of the past 50 years lived up to that heritage and to Joseph Pulitzer’s eloquent, progressive platform?

Not always, but the Post-Dispatch has done a lot of good work to make St. Louis a better community.

Some of us in the Washington Bureau joined Laszlo Domjan and other St. Louis reporters to dig deeply into dioxin contamination in Missouri. “Dioxin: Quandary for the 80s” may have been an exaggerated headline. But it was a big story and part of the even bigger scandal at Reagan’s EPA. Jon Sawyer dug into defense fraud at General Dynamics. He, Bob Adams, Rob Koenig, Charlotte Grimes and J.B. Forbes, a photographer from the St. Louis office, told international stories with a local sensibility. Thomas Ottenad was the first reporter to identify Jimmy Carter as an up-and-comer and my wife, Margie, wrote groundbreaking stories on women in politics – including Phyllis Schlafly.

Grimes told the tragedy of five nuns from Ruma, Il. who were murdered in Liberia in 1992. Koenig brought us back pieces of the Berlin Wall. And Sawyer, following in the steps of Richard Dudman and Childs, traveled the world, writing stories a reporter couldn’t get from the safety of the American consulate. He was there with photographer Odell Mitchell Jr. for Nelson Mandela’s triumphal election in 1994.

Lou Rose and Michael Sorkin disclosed the sexual escapades that landed the law-and-order Circuit Attorney George Peach in

prison. Terry Ganey uncovered Missouri Attorney General William Webster's misuse of the Second Injury Fund. Bill Lambrecht wrote about the environmental degradation of Native American lands when no one else was paying attention. Most people still aren't.

The editorial page helped block Attorneys General John Ashcroft and Jay Nixon's attempts to kill the St. Louis school desegregation plan and crusaded for the sales tax that continued it for two decades into the 21st century. In the tradition of Irving Dilliard, Richard Dudman and Robert Lasch's pieces exposing the folly of Vietnam, Jon Sawyer and the editorial page challenged the false narrative that weapons of mass destruction justified the invasion of Iraq.

Who can forget the PD photographers' Pulitzer images of the Ferguson protests or Tony Messenger's Pulitzer winning columns that grew out of an enlightenment brought on by Ferguson. And just last year Jeremy Kohler's disclosures helped send the St. Louis County executive to prison.

Martha Shirk wrote about children as no other reporter in the country; her stories reformed Missouri's handling of child deaths. Sally Bixby Defty was the first woman to lead the City Desk and provided a model for young reporters. Jo Mannies dished political scoops at the P-D and St. Louis Public Radio. And no other paper in the country was graced with the elegance of the column Editor William Woo wrote weekly to readers.

Kevin Horrigan was a terrific sports editor and editorial writer. He and I competed each year to write the most editorials; he always won. Harry Levins had a gift for making complicated things simple and Tim O'Neil for bringing St. Louis history alive. And Bill McClellan was the franchise player as the local columnist.

Dave Nicklaus and Jim Gallagher have outlasted us all at the Post-Dispatch covering business, which also was the domain of

Roland Klose and Ed Kohn.

This list leaves out many great stories and people with a big impact and is slanted toward events and people I knew best. I apologize for its egocentricity. It is a memoir not a balanced history. So it's a quirky recreation of some important events, leaving out many others – Pat Rice's coverage of the Pope's trip to St. Louis, the sports and photo staffs' great work on the World Series, Vahe Gregorian's singular Olympics coverage to say nothing of the Rams' Superbowl and Blues' Stanley Cup.

I confess my contributions to sports and business were nothing to brag about – poor coverage of the purchase of the Rams and later complicity with a terrible editorial stand favoring taxpayer support for the new Busch Stadium.

The events recounted here certainly looked different to other journalists who have their own stories to tell about events that seem much more important.

And, like a lot of what I've written over my career, this memoir is way too long.

But the point is the Post-Dispatch often has lived up to the Pulitzer platform. It and other media newcomers often have made St. Louis better.

Yet, much has been lost in 50 years. The Post-Dispatch newsroom has lost more than two-thirds of the reporters. The seven-person Washington Bureau is gone. So is the Springfield, Il. Bureau. The days of Fitzpatrick, Mauldin, Engelhardt, Sherffius and Matson are over – although Dan Martin and his Weatherbird hang on gamely. The Editorial page is a shadow of itself and has been out of touch with the Black community, although it recently hired Antonio French, a strong Black commentator. Still the paper blasts popular black officials and recently editorialized to keep the Workhouse open without addressing whether too many people are locked up before trial.

Other robust news organizations also have lost muscle. The robust At Your Service news programming of KMOX is a distant memory. Who remembers that Jack Bush inaugurated it in 1960 with an interview with Eleanor Roosevelt? Search for At your Service and KMOX today and you get Second Amendment Radio. And from 11-2 each day Rush Limbaugh proselytizes the faithful with fact-free propaganda.

Other important news providers were born over the past half century – St. Louis Magazine, the Business Journal and the Riverfront Times, for example. The St. Louis Beacon thrived and merged with St. Louis Public Radio, cutting its teeth with in-depth coverage of Ferguson. And Emily Rauh Pulitzer's support along with Jon Sawyer's drive have turned the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting into one of the nation's most robust new sources of news, taking its content into schools in St. Louis and around the country.

## **Chapter 1 – The 1970s: Ignoring civil rights**

The Link era may have been golden and the city desk a bustling place with more than a hundred reporters. But it was almost all white and male and old. Ted Wagner and the veteran rewrite men would go off to Miss Hullings for breakfast after the first edition – although others traveled a shorter distance to the Press Box bar across the street to have mid-morning drinks.

Some of the jaded rewrite reporters would laugh when Ed O'Brien, the Globe-Democrat's lone Washington reporter, beat the fancy pants crew in the Washington Bureau. Sometimes news gathering by these rewrite men devolved into calling up the cops or city hall and asking – "The story on p-1 of the Globe – is it right?" If the answer was yes, the rewrite man would just copy it.

Blacks and women were just arriving in the newsroom. Robert Joiner, Ellen Sweets, Fred Sweets, Don Franklin, Tommy Robertson, Tony Glover and Damian Obika joined the staff with Gerald Boyd, Sheila Rule, Kenneth Cooper and Linda Lockhart soon to follow. A number of the Black reporters were the product of the visionary Pulitzer scholarship at Mizzou. Cooper later won a Pulitzer prize and Boyd won three Pulitzers as managing editor of the New York Times. Carolyn Kingcade became the PD's top-ranking Black editor and Cynthia Todd the recruiter.

Most of the women, including my wife Margaret Wolf Freivogel, had to start on the Women's Page. Sally Bixby Defty, Connie Rosenbaum, Linda Eardley and Charlene Prost were among the first women on the city desk. By the time Margie and I arrived on City Desk in the spring of 1972, there was a sprinkling of women in the rear rows of the city room. Margie, Sally Thran and Karen Van Meter were among them. The brilliant, irascible E.F. Porter Jr. sat among them. That was about 12 rows back from the editors and almost out of sight.

Mike Milner, the short, gruff, military veteran who was assistant city editor, was shocked when Van Meter, in her 20s, threatened to throw him out the 5th floor window for butchering her copy.

Seated in the front rows were the gray-haired or balding veteran rewrite men who took stories from legmen on the beats. They were the graying princes of the newsroom. Eardley once described them as "row after row of white men typing, smoking and screaming."

Even though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had outlawed sex discrimination, newsrooms weren't paying attention. This was before Betsy Wade Boylan sued the New York Times. It was six years before the Pregnancy Discrimination Act and the same year Title IX passed.

Newspapers openly discriminated. When my wife tried to get a job at the Boston Globe in 1971, the interviewer asked why he should hire her when she would just get pregnant. He could do that. It was legal.

The Post-Dispatch didn't live up to the Platform in its coverage of civil rights. The second Joseph Pulitzer favored *Brown v. Board* but cautioned editorial editor Dilliard not to push for desegregation of hotels and restaurants. When Richard Dudman happened upon a civil rights sit-in in the 1950s and rushed back to the paper, he was told not to cover that kind of story for fear of riots. James C. Millstone, a mentor to many of us, filed stories on the civil rights movement in the South, but his dispatches never ran as written but were blended into wire stories – to his horror. Coverage of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream speech" was buried far down in the story. The liberal editorial page patronizingly advised the Jefferson Bank demonstrators in 1963 to pull back from blocking bank entrances, lecturing, "does it not owe the business efforts to end discrimination a chance to prove successful?" And in 1972, when Percy Green's ACTION group unmasked Monsanto VP Tom K. Smith Jr. as the Veiled Prophet, the Post-Dispatch joined the Globe in keeping his identity secret.

One day in 1972 Charlie Prendergast, a beloved executive city editor, assigned me to investigate the death of Joseph Lee Wilson in police custody. Wilson was white. Police said he had fallen off a barstool; Mike Royko, the witty Chicago columnist, quipped the barstool must have been on top of the John Hancock building. Prosecutors confided that the damage to Wilson's ribs was in the shape of an imprint of an officer's shoe. No officer was charged.

As Prendergast sent me off on the story he gave me a final warning. He opened the bottom left drawer of his desk and pointed to a stack of stories. He told me it was a big project on racism that never had made it into publication. Make sure



you don't make the same mistake, he cautioned.

It wasn't the only time a big racism project at the Post-Dispatch that failed to make it into print. A months-long project in 1999 also never saw the light of day.

Meanwhile, the Globe-Democrat was an accomplice of J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO undercover intelligence program intended to hound King into killing himself. One 1968 document obtained by the Post-Dispatch read:

"The feeding of well chosen information to the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, a local newspaper, whose editor and associate editor are extremely friendly to the Bureau and the St. Louis Office, has also been utilized in the past and it is contemplated that this technique might be used to good advantage in connection with this program."

Another read: "The St. Louis Globe-Democrat has been especially cooperative with the Bureau in the past. Its publisher [name deleted] is on the Special Correspondents List."

And just before King's assassination in Memphis, the Globe carried an FBI ghost editorial complete with a misspelling. The March 30, 1968 editorial read: "Memphis could be only the prelude to a massive bloodbath in the Nation's Capitol [sic]"

The only blood spilled was King's in Memphis.

*(For a more detailed account of how the press flubbed coverage of the Civil Rights Movement, see [our special issue on race](#).)*

The Globe, where Pat Buchanan wrote editorials before becoming a Nixon speechwriter, also attacked Dudman, the Washington Bureau Chief. Dudman reported from Vietnam about the Pentagon's lies about the war and obtained the Post-Dispatch's copy of the Pentagon Papers on a tip from I.F. Stone.

Dudman had reported after a trip to Vietnam, "The South

Vietnamese government...may be losing and the Viet Cong winning." Nixon blew up. A week before Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, Alexander P. Butterfield relayed to Henry Kissinger Nixon's view that "Dudman is a 'violent leftist' and that these statements are completely opposite from the truth."

The Globe ran an unheard of front-page editorial – "For America or For Hanoi" – essentially calling Dudman a traitor. Nixon put Dudman on the Enemies List.

On its news and editorial pages the Globe championed Juvenile Court Judge Gary Gaertner who had replaced Theodore McMillian, a splendid Black judge who went on to serve on the federal appeals court. The Globe praised Gaertner for bringing down crime after years of McMillian "coddling" young criminals. It turned out some of the court's top staffers were horrified by Gaertner's operation of the court. Gaertner and the Globe were cooking the figures on juvenile crime and Gaertner even was holding juveniles in custody to keep control of detention cells.

A court source mentioned Gaertner had appointed the publisher of the Globe, G. Duncan Bauman, to serve as "guardian ad litem" in some cases. This was a cushy, well-paid court appointment. I was having trouble confirming the tip. But Rep. Bill Clay volunteered to help get court records through his patronage employees in the circuit clerk's office. Those records proved payments of taxpayer money to Bauman.

The Post-Dispatch wouldn't run my story even after it was confirmed because it was critical of the competitor's publisher. So I went to Charles Klotzer whose St. Louis Journalism Review, which had disclosed that the Post-Dispatch and Globe were in league having signed a joint operating agreement. I had been in Klotzer's living room along with Ted Gest during one of those inaugural meetings of the Journalism Review. Klotzer gladly published the story on Bauman.

About 20 years later, when I had returned from the Washington Bureau, Rep. Richard A. Gephardt put forward Gaertner's name for a federal judgeship. I reprised my stories and women's and Black groups voiced their opposition, with Harriett Woods in the lead. The Clinton White House took the extraordinary step of rejecting Gephardt's choice and Catherine Perry was named instead.

The Wall Street Journal reacted to Clinton's action by accusing me by name of "Borking" Gaertner – in other words getting him rejected for politically unpalatable positions like Robert Bork had been rejected. A top PD executive who palled around with Gaertner complained to the publisher and I was asked to defend my reporting, which I did. It was the only time that ever happened.

Perry in place of Gaertner made a difference. Recently, Perry has written groundbreaking opinions protecting peaceful protesters from police abuse during Ferguson and beyond.

## **Chapter 2: Getting things done**

After witnessing the municipal court system and its corrupt mix of bail bondsmen, disreputable defense lawyers and prosecutors on the take, I shelved the idea of going back to law school.. "Let's get something done," Prendergast, my editor would say. And I soon discovered that journalism was a force for getting things done.

With Paul Wagman we cleaned out a brutal Maplewood police department where Thomas Brown had been shot dead in the police station in 1977 and other officers forced suspects to play Russian roulette with guns in their mouths. Gov. Christopher S. Bond sent me a pen he had used to sign a bill reforming the bail system. The head of the St. Louis pound, a color announcer on the Football Cardinals broadcasts, quit soon after a story about how he spent most of his time running his tavern – a story that required many hours of drinking beer at

his bar. Monsanto Co. ended its questionable political contributions program after I met confidentially at a hotel near the airport with a top executive who provided a checkbook showing Monsanto's Washington lobbyist directed executives' donations to CREEP – the Committee to Re-elect the President.

I lucked out and spent a day in 1972 observing lax security at Lambert; it happened to be right before Martin McNally hijacked a plane and parachuted from the rear with his cash. When a judge ordered the St. Louis School Board to negotiate with the teachers union, I put my ear to the door in the Jefferson hotel room where they were negotiating and got a scoop. The judge laughed the next day that I had overheard how the mediators excoriated the School Board for a proposal “straight out of the 19th century.” When the South County bomber frightened St. Louisans in 1977, a six-pack of Michelob outside the hotel door of a St. Louis County cop got me a big scoop – the boyfriend of the first victim had been seen at later bombing scenes.

There were threats along the way. I started getting calls from Franklin V. Chesnutt who announced he was a card-carrying member of the KKK – literally a card carrying member because he sent me his business card and threatened to burn a cross on the lawn. City desk got a bomb threat in connection with stories about bail bondsmen. Paul Wagman – my partner on Maplewood police stories – started getting threatening calls at home, sending him to a friend's house to spend the night. I put plastic tape on the door to our garage in Parkview because I was covering car bombings involving labor leaders connected with the mob.

So in 1980 I welcomed the idea of going to Washington and covering the Supreme Court.

But Margie and I had a new idea about how to do it. We had just had our third child, Meg, and proposed splitting a job. That way we could each have time with the children and keep

our careers going.

Dudman, the bureau chief, was a liberal but had strict ideas about work. He wasn't so sure about our proposal. One night, at a dinner party on his front porch, he asked his friend, Betty Friedan, what she thought. She told Dudman it was exactly what she was writing about, the second wave of feminism.



Joseph Pulitzer Jr.  
Courtesy of Pinterest

Dudman became a believer the day Reagan was shot. Margie went to George Washington Hospital. Close to midnight I loaded our kids into a Barwood taxi and met her at the hospital. She took the kids, I took her notes. And Dudman got what he always wanted – a reporter who could work 24 hours a day without sleeping.

Joseph Pulitzer Jr. called it “our little experiment” and we thought it might pave the way for more job-sharing. A couple

of other reporters tried it, but it wasn't the wave of the future. Still it was the best decision we made for our family.

## **Chapter 3: The 1980 – Chronicling Reagan's demolition of civil rights**

For the next eight years I watched as the affable movie star president charmed the American people while turning his back on civil rights, trying to kill the Legal Services Corp., ignoring toxic wastes, closing his eyes to defense fraud, campaigning against "welfare queens" and conspiring to send arms to Iran in the Iran-Contra scandal.

Some thought the big Post-Dispatch Washington Bureau was a luxury. But it was a way to explain to readers back home how St. Louis fit into the national picture.

As soon as Reagan took office, Missouri interests began lobbying the Justice Department to abandon cases and prosecutions. The Justice Department dropped a Foreign Corrupt Practices Act prosecution against four McDonnell Douglas executives, including James McDonnell III, son of Mr. Mac, the McDonnell Douglas founder. The charges were dropped after Associate Attorney General Rudolph Giuliani met secretly with the corporation's lawyer. Yes, same Rudy Giuliani same shady practices. Line prosecutors sharply criticized the secret meeting, held without them present, and blasted dismissal of the charges that grew out of paying bribes to sell aircraft to Pakistan.

About the same time, Attorney General Ashcroft was busy getting the Justice Department to reverse the Carter Justice Department and announce opposition to the St. Louis-St. Louis County interdistrict school desegregation program. The program, crafted to remedy decades of legal segregation, was just getting underway in St. Louis.

When I walked into the office of the Justice Department lawyer handling the case, I found the documents reversing the position sitting on the desk. But the lawyer wasn't there. Having studied at the elbow of investigative reporter Lou Rose, I simply read the papers upside down on the desk and filed a story for the last edition. It wasn't the best move for a person who later became a professor of journalistic ethics. And for a while I was persona non grata at the Justice Department.

It turned out that backtracking on school desegregation in St. Louis led to a story on a much bigger Justice Department offensive against civil rights enforcement. That retrenchment, led by Assistant Attorney General Civil William Bradford Reynolds, included attempts to end affirmative action, reverse the belated desegregation of the University of Missouri, stop suing state prisons and hospitals for unconstitutional treatment and to reinstate tax breaks for segregated institutions like Bob Jones University.

The Bob Jones case blew up on Reagan. It went to the Supreme Court, which batted down Reagan's initiative. The Supreme Court also ignored the Ashcroft attempt to stop the St. Louis school desegregation program, which went on to become the largest and arguably most successful school desegregation program in the country. It was responsible for desegregating thousands of classrooms in St. Louis and St. Louis County.

The dioxin contamination of Missouri horse corrals and Times Beach soon became an all-consuming story. The mismanagement of Superfund sites like Times Beach by Assistant Administrator Rita Lavelle contributed to her conviction on perjury charges. The broader mismanagement of EPA doomed Administrator Anne Gorsuch as well.

Christmas 1982 was wrecked because the Centers for Disease Control recommended the Times Beach buyout on Dec. 23. To make matters worse, the Globe beat us to the story.

Working with Jon Sawyer on the General Dynamics defense fraud story was a lesson into the power of congressional chairmen and investigators. The General Dynamics investigation was led by Rep. John Dingell, D-Mi., – who always had “powerful” attached to his name – and his wily investigator Pete Stockton.

Reporters loved Stockton because he leaked information the committee had subpoenaed from companies. He’d usually leak the day before the hearing in order to raise interest. The day before General Dynamics Chair David Lewis was to testify, Stockton leaked juicy tidbits to us and other media.

One of those tidbits concerned General Dynamics charging the government \$155 a day kennel fees for Furston the dog at Silver Maple Farm in St. Louis.

Sawyer and I were a high-minded pair and this story about the dog seemed beneath us. Of course, none of the other reporters saw it that way. Mary McGrory, the Washington Post’s great columnist, wrote a wonderful take down of Lewis all centered around Furston.

Before we left Washington to return to St. Louis there was one last big story with repercussions back home – the retirement of Thurgood Marshall and his replacement by Clarence Thomas. Sen. John Danforth, R-Mo., was Thomas’ mentor and political ace, singing “Onward Christian Soldiers” with him as he prepared to denounce his “high-tech lynching” before the cameras.

Thomas had worked at Monsanto Co. and in Danforth’s Missouri Attorney General’s office before moving quickly up the Reagan administration until he headed the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Marshall, the legendary civil rights lawyer, had won Brown v. Board in the Supreme Court. I remember, him enfeebled, walking with a cane, to his retirement press conference. He didn’t



make it a secret that he considered the man in line to replace him to be a “snake.” Thomas went on to cast the deciding vote to end the era of court ordered school desegregation in Kansas City in 1995 – bringing down the curtain on what Marshall had begun 41 years earlier..

Having interviewed Thomas when he was head of the EEOC, I knew he was nothing like the taciturn, silent judge he projects, but rather a gregarious raconteur who enjoyed telling funny stories while smoking a good cigar. And having talked to Thomas’ colleagues in the Missouri Attorney General’s office, I also knew his jokes could sometimes be blue enough to make one devout young colleague, John Ashcroft, stomp off indignantly.

Anita Hill could well have viewed Thomas’ “humor” as sexual harassment – a phrase just beginning to take on a legal meaning as a form of sex discrimination.

The anger that our Post-Dispatch coverage of the Thomas hearings induced on the talk radio in St. Louis was an introduction to the deep partisan divide that was approaching.

## **Chapter 4 – Woo v. Campbell – journalism as a public trust vs. public journalism**

When Joseph Pulitzer Jr. named Bill Woo as editor, many staffers hoped he would bring a new golden age. Pulitzer saw Woo as his protege and a believer in what Pulitzer called a “tradition of conscience.”



William Woo , professor and longtime journalist  
Courtesy to Stanford University

Two careful, novel decisions as editor ended up backfiring. One was to offer Mayor Vince Schoemehl a front page response to a tough series called "The Mayor's Money Machine," linking campaign contributions to city contracts. Schoemehl's response called the series "Half-truths, innuendo and bold faced lies . . . (reminiscent of the Nazi propaganda machine of the 1930s." Some reporters who worked on the stories never forgave Woo for giving Schoemehl a front-page platform for his diatribe.

Woo also was proud to have set up a staff committee to replace Managing Editor David Lipman, the brash, aggressive managing editor who had been chosen over our mentor Millstone. Woo's committee chose Foster Davis from the Charlotte Observer. Soon Davis and Woo were at odds over such things as the role of the Washington Bureau.

By 1995 Woo had become one of the nation's leading critics of a popular form of journalism referred to as "civic" or "public" journalism. In the 30th Press-Enterprise Lecture he delivered that year, Woo advocated instead for journalism as a public trust.

He described public or civic journalism this way. "Editors sit on public boards or commissions or action committees. Newspapers are becoming the conveners of their community, the master of ceremonies of the new democracy. Journalists no longer serve or inform the electorate; they become it."

Woo argued that traditional values of objectivity and detachment shouldn't be dismissed so easily. "Can a paper objectively report on a burning community issue when the editor sits on the commission that is promoting a particular point of view on the matter?" he asked.

"...Damn right ...we should listen to the public. But should the consensus at the town meeting automatically become our agenda?"

As eloquently as Woo argued for journalism as a public trust, his days as editor were ending. Joseph Pulitzer Jr., had died in 1993 and Michael Pulitzer's choice of a successor was the anti-Woo. It was Cole Campbell, one the nation's champions of public journalism.

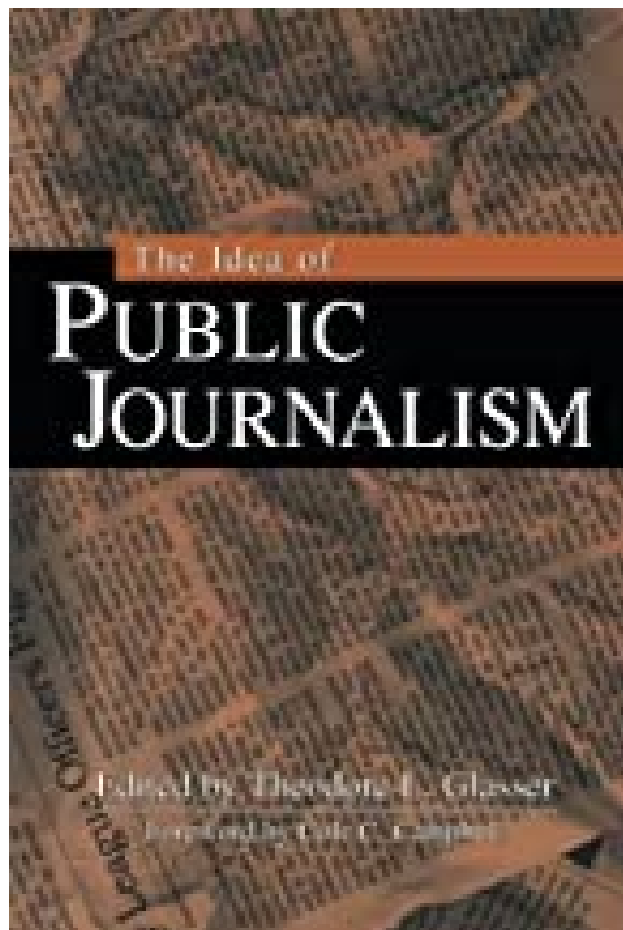
Campbell's editorship was tumultuous and short. Harry Levins likened his demise to the Caine Mutiny and sent Publisher Terry Egger a copy of that novel after Egger forced Campbell out in April, 2000.

Don Corrigan wrote in the St. Louis Journalism Review about the drastic shift from the opponent of public journalism to a leading evangelist. And Ellen Harris wrote a damaging 1998 SJR story about Campbell picking Christine Bertelson to be editorial editor at a time they had a social relationship.

Trying to head off the story, Campbell wrote Ed Bishop, then SJR's editor, "If you publish any statements alleging that [editorial page editor Christine A. Bertelson's] appointment was made for personal reasons, that will be libelous on its face – to her and to me." Campbell denied this was a threat to sue but added his legal understanding had been "confirmed ... in connection with this inquiry with counsel for the Post-Dispatch."

It didn't help Campbell's reputation that a few years later the Pulitzers had to send attorney Bob Hoemeke of Lewis Rice to apologize to a top editor of the New Orleans Times-Picayune for Campbell making a pass at his wife.

By the time Campbell arrived at the annual James C. Millstone Memorial Lecture in March, 2000 and joined a discussion with Gerald Boyd – former Post-Dispatch reporter and New York Times managing editor – Campbell looked haggard and was deeply unpopular.



Cole Campbell Public Journalism book Courtesy of Amazon.in

Boyd did not want to debate Campbell about public journalism. But Campbell immediately took after the Times as a paper for “elites” drinking Bombay martinis. He said elites buy the Times “so at cocktail parties they can say to each other: ‘Did you see the story about such and such in the New York Times?’ And then they can say: ‘Yes, I did see that.’ And then they give each other high fives. ‘We are elite. We are elite.’ “

Although Campbell bragged of having been a debating champion, it was the kid who grew up bagging groceries in North St. Louis and attending Soldan High School who won the day.

Egger, the publisher, asked for a recording of the exchange with Boyd. He also met at the Missouri Bar & Grille with Levins, the respected writing coach, McClellan, the star columnist, Carolyn Tuft, an investigative reporter, and John McGuire, a legendary feature writer. As Alicia C. Shepard reported in the American Journalism Review, Levins told Egger, “We are the officers from the Caine, and this time we are not going to chicken out.”

A few days later, on April 5, Campbell was out.

One person who stabilized the paper during this era was Managing Editor Richard K. Weil, long a source of good judgment in the newsroom. Campbell pushed him aside toward the end of his editorship.

## **Chapter 5: Legacy of the Editorial Page**

I spent my last 10 years at the Post-Dispatch on the editorial page, which I considered the conscience of the newspaper.

I joined under Ed Higgins, the smart, blunt, clever writer who was editor. The staff was loaded with talent – Susan Hegger,

who knew the ins and outs of TIFs; Bob Joiner, an authentic Black voice; Donna Korando, who published the best op ed page in the country; and the deputy Dale Singer, who knew everything about Missouri politics and education. All four later were a core staff for St. Louis Public Radio a decade later.

I regret I didn't listen more carefully to Joiner. He was highly critical of the disparity between crack and cocaine sentencing as well as the Clinton compromise cutting back on welfare. He also immediately saw the disaster of a former Brooks Brothers executive coming in to manage the St. Louis schools. I rolled over him and later Linda Lockhart in what I now realize was a white privilege sort of way. Bob was right; I was wrong but able to control the editorial position.

Campbell threw Higgins overboard and put Bertelson in charge. He claimed the editorial page was "moribund" under Higgins. Not true. But the page was lively and had notable accomplishments during Bertelson's tenure.

An editorial campaign by the brilliant Philip Kennicott helped defeat a voter referendum to allow carrying concealed weapons – although that victory was short-lived because the Legislature overrode the people—as the Missouri Legislature is wont to do.

When Attorney General Jay Nixon came to the steps of Vashon High School and launched his effort to end the St. Louis-St. Louis County school desegregation program, the editorial page opposed him as did Rep. Clay, former Washington University Chancellor William Danforth and the NAACP. Danforth lined up Civic Progress and an editorial-a-day series urged St. Louis voters to tax themselves to keep the interdistrict program going. Miraculously, they did and it has continued to function while gradually phasing out.

We put out a special edition within hours of the Sept. 11

attacks. "WE are living through another day of infamy. September 11, 2001, will live alongside December 7, 1941, as a day when America changed," said the editorial. "The United States will be a different, more vulnerable place. Daily life as an American will never seem as safe or as free."

And we cautioned in the third paragraph, "Inevitably, this fight will constrict our everyday freedoms. It could test our commitment to civil liberty."

It did. John Ashcroft, had been named attorney general after President George W. Bush's election and Ashcroft's loss to Mel Carnahan, who had died in a plane crash before the election.

We had opposed Ashcroft's confirmation because of his history of opposition to the St. Louis school desegregation program and his racially fraught and successful effort to block confirmation of Ronnie White as a federal judge. I had even gone to Washington D.C. to write daily editorials in opposition to Ashcroft's AG appointment, although that plan fizzled because the new editor, Ellen Soeteber, had promised Egger to tone down "red meat" editorials – or so I was told.

Soeteber was an excellent journalist and rebuilt the credibility of the paper. But this was one of a couple of run-ins I had with her. Another occurred when she forced out the talented cartoonist John Sherffius for a cartoon blaming Republicans for protecting "pork" in a spending bill. She wanted more donkeys in the cartoon; Sherffius angrily drew them in and quit.

Soeteber was supportive as we criticized Ashcroft's civil liberties abuses in the wake of 9/11, including rounding up 5,000 Middle Eastern men with no evidence of wrongdoing. The "enhanced interrogation techniques" – aka torture – approved by the Justice Department made a mockery of the Geneva Conventions.

A couple of things temper my criticism of Ashcroft as I look

back. One is that Ashcroft stood up to White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales and Chief of Staff Andrew Card when they pressured him to approve anti-terrorism measures that Acting Attorney General James Comey refused to approve. Comey tells of putting the flashing light on the top of his car as he and FBI Director Robert Mueller raced the White House crew to Ashcroft's hospital room. Ashcroft, his wife at his bedside, backed Comey.

In addition, when Matt Blunt was inaugurated governor in Jeff City in 2005, Ashcroft handed Ronnie White a note of apology for the way he had blocked his federal court nomination. White told Ashcroft he was too late, but in a day when no one apologizes, I thought Ashcroft deserved credit. I also remember the old days, before the bitter election of 2000, when Ashcroft was often charming when he'd pull off his suit coat to debate Post-Dispatch editorial writers around our conference table.

The legacy of Irving Dilliard and Bob Lasch was an important reminder when Bush turned the war against terrorism into the invasion of Iraq in the fall of 2002. Dilliard had warned against U.S. involvement in Vietnam as early as 1954. Lasch had won a Pulitzer in 1965 for making the Post-Dispatch among the first newspapers to oppose the Vietnam War.

There are times when newspapers outside the Washington-New York media axis can exercise greater independence from the power structure. Vietnam was one; Iraq another.

Sawyer's stories and our editorials challenged Bush's claim that Saddam's weapons of mass destruction justified an invasion of Iraq. But the Pentagon's brilliant tactic of embedding journalists with the troops in Kuwait meant that Ron Harris' stories on local troops preparing for the invasion were on page 1 and while our work was farther back in the paper.



Most editorials take an afternoon to write. This one opposing the Iraq war took two months under Soeteber's close supervision. She was nervous enough that we were talking on the phone even after the first edition of the Sunday paper had gone to the presses.

The editorial – A War Too Soon – explicitly harkened back to Dilliard's and Lasch's thinking: "The echoes of Vietnam provide a clearer warning. America feared a series of threats in Asia as nations fell to communism like dominoes; Mr. Bush sees a series of evil states threatening U.S. security. America's military seemed omnipotent in 1964; it seems unstoppable today. America sought to contain the powerful idea of anti-colonialism wrapped in communist ideology; now it confronts a threatening strain of Islamic pan-nationalism that also has anti-colonialist roots. The Lyndon Johnson administration created a 'credibility gap' by stretching the facts; the Bush administration has strained its credibility by unconvincingly trying to link Iraq to bin Laden and arguing that Iraq is a more of a threat than North Korea."

## **Chapter 6 – Leaving the PD and entering the 21st century**

When it became known that the Pulitzers were selling the Post-Dispatch, Jon Sawyer, Bob Duffy, Margie and I had a truly bad idea – an employee buyout. Jon and I sat through a meeting one afternoon during which financiers told us how easy it would be for an employee-owned PD to take on \$400 million in mezzanine – whatever that is. Suffice it to say we didn't get too far and Pulitzer sold to Lee Enterprises. Emily Pulitzer, the chief stockholder and a friend, invited our buy-out group to lunch and nicely said this was the only sensible way to go.

Whenever we think back on our crazy idea, we breathe a huge sigh of relief that we failed. The 2005 sale date was the moment newspapers fell off a cliff. The Pulitzers walked away

with \$1.46 billion, while Lee Enterprises ended up filing for bankruptcy by 2011.

The class of 2005 was what Richard Weiss called the big cohort of reporters and editors leaving the PD at the end of that year.

<https://www.weisswrite.com/about/post-dispatch-class-of-05>

We joined the communications revolution and started online news operations. Many of us started the St. Louis Beacon in 2008 with Margie as editor, Weil chair and Duffy fundraiser extraordinaire. Meanwhile Sawyer had started the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting in D.C. and soon was joined in that enterprise by his wife Kem. [The Pulitzer Center](#) has become a burgeoning new media nonprofit telling untold stories from abroad and at home. They are the biggest source of funding for international reporting in the country. Emily Pulitzer was key to both startups.

Margie decided to try again to publish a race project at the Beacon. She travelled around town to line up media partners. Many said it was a good idea but all had reasons they could not participate. One media executive actually said it was **“too soon”** to write about race in St. Louis. The Beacon ended up publishing the project with the Missouri Historical Society as a partner. It was called: Race Frankly, which included my stories on Kirkwood’s Journey.

Charles “Cookie” Thornton had killed five officials in the Kirkwood City Hall in 2008. I spent a year listening as people in my hometown described the racial hurt they still felt from racial discrimination.

I remember Harriet Patton, the strong leader of Meacham Park, tell of a junior high teacher at Nipher ripping up an English essay she had worked hard on as a child. The teacher ripped it up because it was too good – no Black child could have written it without cheating, the teacher claimed.

A few years later when Mizzou's doomed president Tim Wolfe tried to block the Beacon's merger with St. Louis Public Radio, Emily Pulitzer and other St. Louis civic leaders were again key to closing the deal.

As a result, the Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio newsroom had merged by the time of Ferguson and provided some of the best coverage. St. Louis Public Radio devoted the entire staff to Ferguson reporting, curating a live blog to keep up with the rapid news developments, recreating what happened in One Year in Ferguson, explaining the legal investigations and launching the "We Live Here" podcast on race and class.

Now, only six years later, the newsroom is troubled by persistent complaints about discrimination against staff members of color. Tim Eby, a champion of the merger, didn't address the complaints effectively enough. After he acknowledged systemic racism last summer, he was forced out under intense pressure.

Overall, Ferguson was a journalistic revolution that marked the triumph of the citizen/activist journalist over the traditional mainstream media. Gone forever was the day when an editor at the Post-Dispatch or KMOX could decide a black kid killed by a police officer on a Ferguson street wasn't big news.

The first tweet reporting Michael Brown's death was two minutes after he crashed to the pavement on Canfield Drive. There were five million tweets in the week after Brown's death and 35 million in the months that followed. There was no putting this story back in the bottle.

Protesters with cell phones seized the national agenda, told the story from their points of view, knit together a new national civil rights movement and scratched the scabs off the nation's racial scars.

The Black Lives Matter movement came alive and journalists

here and across the nation realized that what they had done to cover civil rights was not enough, just as what the nation has done to remedy the sins of slavery and segregation was not nearly enough.

In the Front Page days of Link, the police reporter on Saturday afternoon would have just called up the Ferguson police and asked, "Anything happening?" I know. It was my job. The police would almost always say, "Everything's quiet."

Police shooting a suspect from a strong-arm robbery on a Saturday afternoon in the middle of summer wouldn't have made the front page on a Sunday paper back then. The story – which would have been based entirely on what police told a reporter – might not have been published until the following week, if at all. It would have been forgotten by mid-week.

But the communications revolution had changed everything. Never before in America had a story exploded so fast from the people who were disenfranchised. Even though the Twitter story had big mistakes, it told the essential truth about white police officers killing black suspects. And it awakened journalists to the wider truth about race in America and their responsibility to finally tell the truth about it.

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