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Media

Part 1 of a two part series

Secret admirers: The Bushes and the Washington Post

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February 5, 2004—Ever since the days of the Watergate scandal, when a series of front-page articles by Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein ultimately led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon, the Post has had a reputation among many Americans as one of the elite bastions of the "liberal media."

This opinion is especially prevalent among conservatives, who also fault the Post for its publication (along with that other "liberal" icon, The New York Times) of the Pentagon Papers—an action they correctly view as having made a major contribution to undermining domestic support for the war in Vietnam. During the '70s, there was an angry conservative boycott of the paper in the Washington, DC, area, with "I Don't Believe the Post" bumper stickers appearing on cars and WP vending boxes.

At the heart of the Post's "liberal" reputation is the sense that its coverage represents the thinking of what used to be known as the "Eastern Liberal Establishment" back in the days when Republicans could be liberals (with a favorable view of internationalism and the welfare state) and before the Establishment moved to Texas and got saved by Jesus, its favorite political philosopher. This was the same period when the Central Intelligence Agency, still dominated by the Establishment Ivy Leaguers who organized the "oh-so-social" OSS in World War II, was also widely seen as a "liberal" institution.

With a 21st-century perspective, where internationalism has become globalization, and monopoly capitalism is so powerful it no longer needs to mask its agenda with welfare programs, we can see the Establishment's "liberalism" for the ruthless neoliberalism it has always been. Yet the more powerful and elite the ruling class, the greater its need for an effective propaganda system to maintain that power; and the Washington Post remains, as writer Doug Henwood described it in 1990, "the establishment's paper."

In an article published by the media watchdog group, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), Henwood traced the Post's Establishment connections to Eugene Meyer, who took control of the Post in 1933. Meyer transferred ownership to his daughter Katharine and her husband, Philip Graham, after World War II, when he was appointed by Harry Truman to serve as the first president of the World Bank. A lifelong Republican, Meyer had been "a Wall Street banker, director of President Wilson's War Finance Corporation, a governor of the Federal Reserve, and director of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation," Henwood wrote.

Philip Graham, Meyer's successor, had been in military intelligence during the war. When he became the Post's publisher, he continued to have close contact with his fellow upper-class intelligence veterans—now making policy at the newly formed CIA—and actively promoted the CIA's goals in his newspaper. The incestuous relationship between the Post and the intelligence community even extended to its hiring practices. Watergate-era editor Ben Bradlee also had an intelligence background; and before he became a journalist, reporter Bob Woodward was an officer in Naval Intelligence. In a 1977 article in Rolling Stone magazine about CIA influence in American media, Woodward's partner, Carl Bernstein, quoted this from a CIA official: "It was widely known that Phil Graham was somebody you could get help from." Graham has been identified by some investigators as the main contact in Project Mockingbird, the CIA program to

infiltrate domestic American media. In her autobiography, Katherine Graham described how her husband worked overtime at the Post during the Bay of Pigs operation to protect the reputations of his friends from Yale who had organized the ill-fated venture.

After Graham committed suicide, and his widow Katharine assumed the role of publisher, she continued her husband's policies of supporting the efforts of the intelligence community in advancing the foreign policy and economic agenda of the nation's ruling elites. In a retrospective column written after her own death last year, FAIR analyst Norman Solomon wrote, "Her newspaper mainly functioned as a helpmate to the war-makers in the White House, State Department and Pentagon." It accomplished this function (and continues to do so) using all the classic propaganda techniques of evasion, confusion, misdirection, targeted emphasis, disinformation, secrecy, omission of important facts, and selective leaks.

Graham herself rationalized this policy in a speech she gave at CIA headquarters in 1988. "We live in a dirty and dangerous world," she said. "There are some things the general public does not need to know and shouldn't. I believe democracy flourishes when the government can take legitimate steps to keep its secrets and when the press can decide whether to print what it knows."

I guess it depends on what you mean by "democracy."

At any rate, this brief overview of the Washington Post's covert history serves as a useful backdrop to information revealed in "The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power," written by oil industry insider Daniel Yergin, and a national bestseller when it was published in 1991.

In a bit of fortuitous timing, Yergin's book was released in the immediate aftermath of the Persian Gulf War. He unequivocally states in his introduction that "oil was at the heart of [this war]," contradicting the denials of then-President George H.W. Bush, who had insisted in a now-familiar litany that the war against Iraq was really about "freedom." And because of Bush's own professional roots in the oil industry, and the industry's consequent influence on his policies in office, Yergin includes some biographical nuggets that shed an interesting light on Bush's relationship with the Washington Post.

Quoting from a Fortune magazine article about a "swarm of young Ivy Leaguers" who had settled in Midland, Texas, soon after World War II, and "created a most unlikely outpost of the working rich . . . a union between the cactus and the Ivy," Yergin provides an account of the early days of Zapata Oil, Bush's first company.

"Bush quickly mastered the skills of the independent oil man," Yergin writes, including, "of course, making the pilgrimage back East to round up money from investors." Here's where things get interesting. "On a brisk morning in the mid-1950s, near Union Station in Washington, DC, he even closed a deal with Eugene Meyer, the august publisher of the Washington Post, in the back seat of Meyer's limousine. For good measure, Meyer also committed his son-in-law to the deal. Meyer remained one of Bush's investors over the years."

A consideration to keep in mind here is the greater-than-even likelihood that at this point in his career, George H.W. Bush was already working as a covert CIA operative. This stems not only from his class and pedigree—Yale University had a reputation as "the alma mater of spies"—but from the fact that the CIA often "borrows" the private assets of businesses, especially those with international operations, to provide support for its covert actions. Most compelling, perhaps, is a cryptic reference found in a Warren Commission document, concerning an FBI briefing about the JFK assassination given in Texas to a "Mr. George Bush of the CIA." When asked about this years later, Bush gave the explanation that it must have referred to a CIA employee with the same name. That individual, a low level bureaucrat, denied to reporters that he had ever been to Texas, much less that in his position he would have received such a briefing.

What is particularly fascinating about Yergin's revelation of the long term financial link between Bush and the Graham family—a revelation also confirmed by Katherine Graham in her memoir—is that George H.W. Bush spent much of his political career complaining about the "liberal" reporting in the Post. Yergin,

whose sketch of Bush's career covers only a few pages in this lengthy book, is slyly aware of this seeming contradiction, so he has some fun with the game Bush was playing. He includes a quote from a note then-Congressman Bush sent to Treasury Secretary David Kennedy in 1969, thanking him for meeting with some Texas oilmen at Bush's home in Houston. "I was also appreciative of your telling them how I bled and died for the oil industry," Bush wrote. "That might kill me off in the Washington Post but it darn sure helps in Houston." A curious comment indeed, considering the Grahams' investment in his business.

This arms-length public posture sometimes went to hilarious extremes. In his book, "Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate," Bob Woodward includes much of the substance of a handwritten three-page reply he received from Bush denying Woodward's request for an interview. Criticizing Woodward's Watergate reporting, Bush wrote, "For me Watergate was a major event, for as you correctly point out, I was chairman of the GOP during those tumultuous times . . . I think Watergate and the Vietnam War are the two things that moved Beltway journalism into this aggressive, intrusive, 'take no prisoners' kind of reporting that I can now say I find offensive."

Just past Watergate's thirtieth anniversary, Bush's comments here bring several observations to mind that have been generally ignored. One is that there had been growing dissatisfaction among the nation's ruling class with the presidency of Richard Nixon, whose environmental and social legislation has led some revisionist commentators to refer to him as "the last liberal president." More importantly, Nixon was also seeking to reorganize the intelligence services. These facts have inspired some out-of-the-mainstream journalists, like Doug Henwood and the late investigative reporter Steve Kangas, to suggest that Woodward's "Deep Throat" contact was actually someone in the CIA. Kangas had also suggested that the semi-conscious and dying William Casey, director of Central Intelligence in the Reagan administration and Woodward's controversial leading "source" for his book, "Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987," was in actuality the "alter ego" of Woodward's real source: George H.W. Bush.

In any event, Woodward's "Shadow" undercuts what he describes as Bush's "hatred" of the press with an account of an episode where the Post served to neutralize an aspect of the Iran-contra scandal that Bush saw as a danger to his upcoming presidential campaign. "On Friday, February 6, 1987," Woodward writes, "Bush dispatched one of his top aides to my house to deliver a copy of a three-page top-secret memo." He goes on to describe how, after Bush saw the headline on the Post's lead story two days later, he called the aide who had delivered the memo to offer congratulations. Woodward's judgment is that, "It was perhaps a shrewd use of the news media by Bush."

Yergin's book also discusses an illuminating episode where the Post offered protective cover for Bush. In a trip to Saudi Arabia in April 1986, then-Vice President Bush appeared to be taking a position in favor of higher oil prices that contradicted the free-market policies of the Reagan administration, and he was receiving a lot of criticism in the American media.

"Columnists denounced him for cuddling up to OPEC," Yergin writes. "Of course, within the oil states he was much commended for what he said. But outside the oil patch, it seemed that just about the only voice that had anything good to say about Bush's position was none other than the editorial page of the Washington Post, the newspaper he had once feared would kill him off for expressing pro-oil industry sentiments. On the contrary, the Post now said that the Vice President was on to a very important point in his warning of how low prices would undermine the domestic energy industry, even if no one wanted to admit it."

Naturally, it could be argued that the Graham family was merely protecting its own investments. But this protective influence extended to other events in Bush's political career, including the major scandals that erupted throughout the Reagan and Bush administrations—Iran/contra, BCCI, Iraqgate, savings-and-loan, CIA drug dealing, HUD—in virtually all of which Bush himself was implicated. As a paper of record and a news source for local and regional papers across the country, the Post was able to keep a muzzle on these scandals, and frame the national coverage in such a way that "respectable" media didn't stray too far from "conventional (which is to say, elite) wisdom."

It was a system that also served the Post's interests. The paper's standing as an important source of news was elevated by its constant diet of confidential information and intelligence leaks from Bush and his allies, and its exclusive access to the inner circles of power. Bush was also able to protect the Post from the exposure of its intimate connections with the CIA when the US Senate's Church Committee hearings were investigating Project Mockingbird in the mid-'70s. As CIA director when those investigations were conducted, Bush successfully fought the release of the names of CIA media contacts to the committee.

Following Bush's one-term presidency, the Post continued to serve the Bush agenda. It was unstinting in its criticism of the Clinton administration, and lurid and exhaustive in its coverage of the various scandals that dogged Bill and Hillary Clinton, invariably conveying the sense that the nation's capital had been invaded by so much Arkansas trailer trash. The Post's Whitewater reporter, Susan Schmidt, was such a reliable conduit of leaks and information from Independent Counsel Ken Starr (Bush's Solicitor General), that she became known to some media critics as "Steno Sue." The paper's voracious approach to Whitewater is all the more revealing in light of the fact that the Whitewater investigation was initiated in the last days of the 1992 campaign by Bush's White House Counsel C. Boyden Gray, and that—as reformed conservative David Brock documents in his book, "Blinded by the Right"—the "vast right wing conspiracy" that sought to depose Clinton essentially constituted a "Bush government in exile."

The Washington Post's traditional and solicitous portrayal of George H.W. Bush as a well-bred man of integrity has of course also been extended to his son, George W. Bush. The often absurd and transparent lengths to which the newspaper has gone to serve this function will be the subject of the second part of this article.

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