

JIM HOAGLAND: A JOURNALIST FIRST

By Jim Hoagland
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Any journalist writing about a boss, colleague or friend is properly suspect. So be aware that Katharine Graham was each of these and more, for me as well as for many others at The Post, where she oversaw the creation of a great newspaper. She was as close to destiny in human form as I ever expect to touch my life.

The strongest bond we formed was also the most difficult to sustain. For me, she was above all a journalist, with a strong interest in politics and international affairs that she honed with characteristic diligence and discipline. Graham had only limited periods when she could take up reporting again, but there was nothing limited about her commitment and determination when those moments came.

I only occasionally glimpsed the many other and more dominant roles she played, from being the Federal City's most renowned hostess to the most powerful woman executive on the Fortune 500 list. Only in the wake of Katharine Graham's death yesterday have I realized how much I actually resented her quasi-journalistic roles for absorbing the time and attention she could have lavished on the real thing, on the inky part of the business. That is, needless to say, a parochial and minority view of how she might have conducted her life.

KG would suffer no gilding of the lily after the fact. She was often tough, frequently self-centered and at times capable of being taken in by mountebanks of the moment, particularly if they were adroit at a certain kind of kidding flattery.

But when we traveled over the course of a decade on assignments — usually but not always to interview a Kohl, a Gorbachev, a King Fahd or other notables of the world — those qualities melted away and a more lasting impression emerged. Somewhere early in her 84 years, Graham formed an active interest in people at large and a view of human nature that made her a natural in our profession.

Somehow, in a life of privilege and influence, Graham had come to a conclusion similar to one that I formed on a small, remote farm outside Rock Hill, S.C. Underneath all the trappings of power, of fashion or of money, people were essentially the same flawed, mortal and unpredictable beings — some capable of heroism and others of chicanery, or at times both. They deserved the benefit of the doubt that their position in life or their responsibilities created for them, until they showed otherwise. Then they deserved skepticism and pursuit.

The stereotypical canard has grown up and made its way into print that this powerful woman boss who inherited the newspaper did not pull her own weight in the interviews, that she had to be primed with questions and told what to say. Horse manure is the mildest thing I can say about that.

She did fluster, girlishly, at the start of many of these sessions or when she welcomed presidents, foreign ministers or mayors into her home or to The Post — which she did systematically over the years as a responsibility to the newspaper and to Washington's growing importance as a world capital.

But this was a mannerism also born in childhood, not in any intellectual inadequacy. She seemed not to understand or be comfortable with her own effect on people. She was simultaneously puzzled, dismayed and flattered by the fear her presence could strike in employees boarding a company elevator or U.S. senators conversing in a corner of her living room. It was irrational, she insisted, as only someone who had never been on the receiving end of her presence could.

Kay insisted on asking simple questions, not trying to play at expertise. They were frequently the best questions, because the leader had not been briefed to expect them. And her powers of observation remained what they had been when she was a young reporter for The Post: After we interviewed the exiled and ailing shah of Iran in Cairo in 1980, I remarked that he did not seem at death's door.

“You haven’t been around people with cancer, have you?” she asked, correctly. “The man was dying before our eyes.” The shah was gone within six weeks.

Great American newspapers almost always rise from enlightened family ownership. So it is with the Grahams, who had the sense to hire and support a great editor in Ben Bradlee and then to keep his innovations alive. My life was changed by the life Katharine Graham lived and the person she was, and so, dear reader, was yours.