

DAVID BRODER: BACKBONE OF THE POST

By David S. Broder
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The world knew Katharine Graham as the poised and powerful publisher who led The Washington Post through a period of turmoil and shaped it into one of the nation's most influential newspapers. The courage it took for her to do all that, when her father's death and her husband's suicide catapulted her into that unexpected leadership role, is something readers learned from her Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir, "Personal History."

But for those of us fortunate enough to work at The Post during the years when she was publisher and Ben Bradlee was executive editor, there was another, more human side to her story. We were allowed to watch her take her first hesitant, awkward steps into her new public role, then warm to it and master it.

When I learned that Mrs. Graham had died from injuries suffered in a fall at Sun Valley, Idaho, my thoughts turned back to another Sun Valley trip she had made almost 35 years ago. I was a newly hired political reporter when my phone rang in the newsroom, summoning me to her eighth-floor office. "I have this letter," Mrs. G said, handing me an invitation for her to speak to a Republican Governors' Association meeting in Sun Valley. "I really don't want to do this. I can't make speeches. But I think I probably ought to. What do you think?"

The Republicans had just scored big gains in the midterm elections of 1966. The Post was viewed by many of them as incorrigibly liberal. I said, "I think if they ask you to speak to them, you should."

"Will you be there?" she asked. I said I was planning to cover the meeting. She said she would tell them she would come.

She did, and got through her speech without any bobbles. But the highlight of the visit — as she recounted it at breakfast on the second day — was what happened on the opening night, when she was invited to join the governors at a private dinner. Afterward, she told me, her old friend Nelson

Rockefeller offered to walk her back to her condo. They got lost on the snowy, winding paths and several times found themselves circling back past the patio where the convivial Gov. Winthrop Rockefeller of Arkansas was enjoying a nightcap and loudly urging them to come join him.

Declining that invitation, they eventually found her condo, and the governor of New York gallantly took her key to unlock the door. But the lock had frozen and when he tried to force it, the key broke.

Nothing to do but return to the front desk, where, at 2 a.m., the blushing Rockefeller explained to a desk clerk that, "Um, I was just walking Mrs. Graham home, and, um, the key broke in the lock, and, um, we — I mean she — needs someone to open the door for her."

When Mrs. G. told me the story, it was with the unfeigned joy of a teenager. But this same uncertain, almost debutante-like woman soon showed the backbone to stand up and protect her paper in battles with the pressmen's union and, famously, the Nixon administration. In hundreds of smaller ways, she encouraged those who worked for her to dig out stories — and let her worry about the consequences. She, more than anyone else, made it clear there were no sacred cows, no subjects to avoid or people who were off-limits, even if they happened to be her friends.

There have been many days in my 35 years at The Post when I felt privileged just to be part of the paper. But the best, bar none, was the day Kay Graham received her Pulitzer. She had earned many honors for the work of the paper, but this was for the book she had written herself, a story only she could have told. The news of her Pulitzer had leaked inside the building. But custom decrees there be no celebration until the official word crosses the Associated Press wire. She had come down to the newsroom that afternoon and was waiting in Executive Editor Len Downie's office. The newsroom staff gathered at the desks closest to that office.

When she came out, the applause began — and just did not stop. Without a word being said, all of us realized in the same instant that this was the time we could express our thanks to the woman who had provided us such unstinting support and such unlimited freedom to do our jobs — the greatest gift any publisher could give. As the applause went on, she began to weep, and so did we.

Now we will weep again, for her but not with her. And bless her memory.