

ROBERT G. KAISER: THE STORIED MRS. GRAHAM

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Katharine Graham was all the things the tributes and obituaries say she was: a pioneer, courageous, gifted as a business executive and as a writer, a woman who left a large mark on the history of her country. But those of us who worked for her would begin this way: Katharine Graham was the ideal boss.

The ideal boss — and she earned that status in a business where the qualities of the boss are critical. Katharine Graham gave her employees at The Washington Post the ultimate journalistic gift: absolute independence.

Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one, quipped A.J. Liebling, the wise if cynical press critic who wrote in the old New Yorker. But he was wrong. Katharine Graham guaranteed freedom of the press to The Post's journalists as though it were their birthright, not just hers. The Washington Post belonged to her, but she turned over the job of shaping it to us, unreservedly.

In all the years she ran The Washington Post Co., she never told us what to cover or what to write, whom to praise or whom to investigate. In the splendid organization she helped create, the people in the news department are totally insulated from the proprietor's opinions. Only the ideal boss could have created this situation.

Ideal is not the same as perfect — the purpose here is not hagiography. Mrs. Graham was a complicated person, riddled with insecurities, awkward in many unfamiliar situations, too easily impressed by people with big titles. She didn't have many pals in the newsroom, and didn't often invite the hired help into her personal life, though she was always accessible to talk shop. She could scare the bejesus out of staff members who didn't normally deal with her, and who couldn't help thinking that the glaring look of disapproval she had just given them threatened their livelihood.

But those looks were usually provoked by what Mrs. Graham considered violations of proper decorum, and they had no enduring consequences. One of the many ironies of Katharine Graham's persona was her chronic discomfort with confrontation. When a reporter aggressively questioned a public official at her lunch table in a way she considered impolite, the look on her face was transparent: What bad manners! I wish I were somewhere else! On other occasions, she asked the tough questions herself.

It's also true that she could be a pretty dreadful snob about some people. But then she could turn around and embrace her humblest employee like a long-lost grandchild. She understood that a big organization putting out a daily newspaper depended on everyone, not just the big names, and made a point of showing her appreciation when she could. Many was the time she would turn to her neighbor at a Post lunch and ask in too loud a whisper, "Who is that?" of a new reporter who just asked a question. The reporter would be mortified, of course, but later he might discover that Mrs. Graham knew his name and had read his story.

An almost paternalistic interest in the staff was something Mrs. Graham had learned from her father, Eugene Meyer. He and Philip Graham, her husband who ran the paper for 16 years before he committed suicide, both had good relations with the workforce, including the blue-collar union members who worked in the small factory that produced The Post each night. This was important history at the time of the biggest crisis of Mrs. Graham's career.

This was not, as popular mythology might have it, the Pentagon Papers or Watergate. It was the strike against The Post by its pressmen, which began before dawn on Oct. 1, 1975, when members of the union vandalized the pressroom, tried to set it on fire and beat up a night foreman, sending him to the hospital for a dozen stitches above one eye. That was the beginning of a strike that lasted 4 1/2 months and changed the course of history — for The Post, and for the American newspaper business.

It's hard to remember now that before the pressmen's strike, trade unions held positions of enormous power in most of America's big newspapers. At The Post the unions effectively managed the factory, deciding who would work what shifts, and negotiating extravagant manning arrangements. For example, Post printers routinely set "bogus" type that would never appear in the paper, and got paid for it. Long newspaper strikes hit many big cities, decimating local commerce for weeks and sometimes months.

Katharine Graham had been publisher of The Post for a dozen years when the strike erupted. She and her managers had already begun trying to rationalize the labor contracts. Composing room employees agreed to a deal, but the pressmen went on strike, violently.

During Watergate Mrs. Graham's job was simply to support her troops. In the Pentagon Papers case she made a huge decision, but it came and went in a flash. In the strike she alone was the responsible executive, and for nearly five months she anxiously second-guessed herself and agonized about the outcome. The agony was visible to those who saw her regularly during the strike. She thought, and talked, and worried about it constantly. Many of her best friends — including lawyer Edward Bennett Williams — told her to back down and make a deal. She refused.

Ultimately The Post made a final offer that the pressmen rejected, and the paper began to hire replacement workers. In a confidential conversation, George Meany, the president of the AFL-CIO, asked Mrs. Graham what she would have done if the pressmen had accepted that final offer. "Slit my throat," she replied. By that time she was sure she didn't want them back in her newspaper. She was delighted with the new pressroom crew, which for the first time included numerous women and minorities.

In her memoir Mrs. Graham devoted nearly 70 pages to the strike, and 45 pages to Watergate. She understood the strike as the great test of her business career, and felt she handled it correctly, so it became not only a victory over the pressmen but over her own sense of inadequacy as well. Before the strike The Post had never been highly profitable, but afterward — and especially after the Washington Star folded in 1981 — profits soared. Unions at The Post and at

other papers began to shy away from confrontations with newspapers they now knew could publish without them, and the world began to change. The presses at The Post, each manned by 17 union members, were now operated by crews of nine.

Katharine Graham, business executive, was always an ambivalent personage, in part because she battled for years with her intuitive sense that women didn't belong in the boardroom. Amazingly, in 1969, six years after she took over The Post, she told an interviewer: "In the world today, men are more able than women at executive work. ... I think a man would be better at this job I'm in than a woman."

The women who worked for her — a group that grew enormously in the years that she ran the paper, from a tiny fraction to a very substantial minority of the staff — had special feelings about Mrs. Graham. Partly this was because she let them see her as both the grand and imposing boss and as a woman, and would also take them seriously.

Maralee Schwartz, The Post's political editor, recalled yesterday a difficult moment during the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco in 1984. Schwartz, who came to The Post as a researcher, had recently received a big promotion and was writing the Politics column. She had just filed one of her first columns from the convention and was nervous as a cat. Was it good enough? Would the editors approve it? She sat anxiously in the anteroom of The Post's work space in San Francisco, when Mrs. Graham walked in.

"What's going on?" the publisher asked. Schwartz acknowledged that she was a nervous wreck, terrified that she wouldn't be able to do a Politics column to The Post's standards, terrified also that she had just written a bad one.

"Aren't we women just like that?" Schwartz recalled Mrs. Graham saying. "We're our own worst enemies. We grew up thinking that only men could do the big, important jobs. We always worry that we're not good enough. Do you think there is even one man out there who is worrying about what he just wrote? Not one. We're our own hardest critics."

Karen DeYoung, one of the most successful women in the newsroom during the Graham years and the London bureau chief in the mid-1980s, recalled yesterday Mrs. Graham's annual visits to London.

"She would ask me to make her hair appointments and find someone to do her makeup," DeYoung, now an associate editor, remembered, "and then she would take me along on all her visits with the most important people," a big boon for the resident correspondent. Sometimes the two women had dinner together. Graham, more than three decades older, would regale DeYoung with anecdotes about the indignities men in the business world, and at The Post, had inflicted on her in the early years. She also liked to gossip.

Even for those who got to spend quite a lot of time with her, Katharine Graham was a tough nut to crack. She had a hard veneer, a combination of good manners, shyness and personal awkwardness that helped her to hide in public. She wasn't good at small talk, or at putting people at ease. She was a grande dame for nearly four decades, which is a long run in that part. Journalists like to figure people out, but she often seemed beyond figuring.

Then in 1997 her book appeared. This was real revelation. It was also difficult for some of the writers who worked for her to deal with. Her employees wrote a great many books while working for The Post, but it seems unlikely that our descendants will consider any of them as good as Katharine Graham's "Personal History." In the course of revealing herself over 600 pages, she demonstrated masterful literary skills — Pulitzer Prize-winning skills, as it turned out. And anyone who had spent 15 minutes in her company knew that the book was her own true voice, no one else's.

It was enough to make a guy jealous — nearly. Jealousy was difficult once you absorbed the story. Its details explained a great deal about Mrs. Graham's idiosyncrasies. The book demonstrated just how much pain and deprivation she had suffered. It made her vastly more human than that grande dame we saw in the newsroom, and a lot more likable, too.

The most amazing part of her story was the portrait she painted of family life as the daughter of Eugene Meyer and Agnes Ernst Meyer, two formidable people incapable (according to their daughter) of affectionate intimacy with their children. Just months after Katharine was born, the Meyers moved from Mount Kisco, N.Y., to Washington, leaving their children behind in the care of nannies. Parents and children lived separately for several years.

Katharine's later childhood was filled with travel, organized activities and all the joys money could buy, but very few of those that came directly from love. She had, she freely acknowledges, no idea who she really was. "I didn't know how to dress, sew, cook, shop and, rather more important, relate to people of any kind." Altogether, her book makes a convincing case that growing up surrounded by wealth, power and impeccable taste can be a truly dreadful experience.

Happily, "Personal History" also offered clues to the joyful, laugh-loving person we sometimes got to see in the newsroom. Many of the stories came as complete surprises. For example, before the book appeared none of us had heard of Eugene "Pat" Patton, who ran the warehousemen's union in San Francisco before World War II. Patton was an important person on the labor beat, and Katharine Meyer (later Graham) was a young reporter covering that beat for the San Francisco News. Patton was "a wonderfully romantic figure," she wrote in her memoir. "Smart, funny and intuitive, though uneducated in any formal sense, he was a brave leader, and a charismatic one." Then the real dish: "In a most unprofessional manner, I realize now, Pat and I became more than friends: he was an early romance of mine. We really liked each other — he was not only highly intelligent but very good-looking. Some weeks after we met, I realized that he was married. I also realized he had a serious drinking problem."

This was Katharine Graham in her first year out of college, romancing a good-looking souse who was cheating on his wife while fighting courageously for the downtrodden warehousemen. All right!

But there were more substantial reasons why we liked working for her. She may have turned the paper

over to her hired hands, but Mrs. Graham never lost interest in its contents. That experience as a labor writer in San Francisco was the real thing: She adored chasing a good story. You couldn't be the ideal boss unless you loved, and understood, what the troops were doing.

For this reporter the enduring memory of Katharine Graham as newswoman will be the interview a group of us had with Mikhail Gorbachev in 1988. Mrs. Graham, Meg Greenfield, Jim Hoagland and I, joined by Rick Smith of Newsweek, spent weeks preparing for this opportunity. Mrs. Graham was our drill sergeant. When we got to Moscow, she wanted to keep planning, so we held more meetings as we walked in the open air in Gorky Park, away from KGB microphones, we hoped.

When we walked into Gorbachev's office, Katharine Graham was beautifully coiffed and nervous as a schoolgirl (as was I). But she looked him straight in the eye and asked the long-planned first question, then followed up. We had a fascinating conversation with the man who changed the modern world.

Then, trouble: urgent calls from Soviet officials, who told us Gorbachev had been upset by one of our questions, which referred to splits in the Communist Party leadership, and mentioned one of his rivals by name. We had to change the transcript of the interview before publication, they insisted, by removing that name.

A senior official was sent to persuade Mrs. Graham to do this. She listened to him for a long while, then responded. "The Washington Post does not censor itself for anyone," she said firmly and calmly. "We wouldn't agree to such a request from the president of the United States, and we won't agree to it for the president of the Soviet Union." She apologized more than once for this immutable fact of life, but there it was. Finally the emissary from Gorbachev gave up. Another senior official accompanying him said to Mrs. Graham as they left, "Don't worry, you won't be arrested."

The ideal boss.