

IF Stone: An Iconic Radical Journalist

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Theme: [History](#)

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Born Isador Feinstein in 1907, his brother Louis said he changed his name at age 30 because “he didn’t want to turn a reader off who might be anti-Semitic, right away, to avoid anti-Semitism in his work.” Most people called him Izzy, and when he died in 1989, biographer DD Guttenplan said “he had (so) transformed (himself) from America’s premiere radical journalist into a respectable icon of his profession” that all four major television networks announced his passing.

ABC’s Peter Jennings called him “a journalist’s journalist.” The New York Times featured his death on its front page (usually reserved for the rich and powerful) in a Peter Flint obituary titled, “IF Stone, Iconoclast of Journalism, Is Dead at 81.” A quintessential muckraker, he described him as “the independent, radical pamphleteer of American journalism hailed by his admirers for his scholarship, wit and lucidity” over a career spanning 67 years.

He quoted Stone saying:

“I tried to bring the instincts of a scholar to the service of journalism; to take nothing for granted; to turn journalism into literature; to provide radical analysis with a conscientious concern for accuracy, and in studying the current scene to do my very best to preserve human values and free institutions.” In the spirit of author Finley Peter Dunne (1867 – 1936), he “comfort(ed) the afflicted and afflict(ed) the comfortable,” in a way few others matched or kept doing for so long.

In a 1987 interview, he deplored what he called the ascendancy of “right-wing kooks (and) the ugly spirit (of Reagan’s not so subtle message that) you should go get yours and run.” Late in life he learned classical Greek to be able to read untranslated works and write “The Trials of Socrates” after more than a decade of study. He criticized the accepted Plato view that he died for exhorting his fellow Athenians to be virtuous. According to Stone, he was seen as a security threat at a time Athenian democracy was imperiled.

In Izzy on Izzy (on ifstone.org), he called himself an “anachronism....an independent capitalist, the owner of my own enterprise, subject to neither mortgage or broker, factor or patron....standing alone, without organizational or party backing, beholden to no one but my good readers.”

They were many, loyal, and included Ralph Nader who called him “the modern Tom Paine – as independent and incorruptible as they come (as) journalism’s Gibraltar and its unwavering conscience.”

Stone called himself “a newspaperman all my life,” publishing a paper (the Progress) at age 14, working for a country weekly, and then as correspondent for two city dailies (the

Haddonfield Press and Camden Courier-Post). Beginning as a high school sophomore, he did this into his third year of college (at the University of Pennsylvania), then quit because “the atmosphere of a college faculty repelled me.” At the same time, he worked afternoons and evenings at the Philadelphia Inquirer “doing combination rewrite and copy desk (work), so I was already an experienced newspaperman making \$40 a week – big pay in 1928.” He did everything “except run a linotype machine.”

In the 1920s as a teenager, he became radicalized, mostly from reading Jack London, Herbert Spencer, Peter Kropotkin (a noted Russian anarchist and early communism advocate), and Karl Marx. He joined the Socialist Party and was elected to its New Jersey State Committee “before I was old enough to vote.” He did publicity for Norman Thomas (1894 – 1968) in the 1928 presidential campaign, but then “drifted away from left-wing politics because of the sectarianism of the left.”

He also believed that party affiliation was incompatible with independent journalism, and he wanted to be “free to help the unjustly treated, to defend everyone’s civil liberty, and to work for social reform without concern for leftist infighting.”

Remembering them “with affection,” he praised his employers for never forcing him to compromise his conscience, even as an anonymous editorial writer. From 1932 – 1939, that was his job for the Philadelphia Record and New York Post, both strongly pro-New Deal papers at the time. In 1940, he came to Washington as The Nation’s editor and remained until his death, working as reporter and columnist for PM, the New York Star, New York Post and New York Compass.

In the 1950s, during the Cold War and McCarthy era, no daily paper (or The Nation) ran his byline, so when the Compass closed in 1952, he launched his own four-page IF Stone’s Weekly in 1953 and wrote:

“Early Soviet novels used a vivid phrase, ‘former people,’ about the remnants of the dispossessed ruling class. On the inhospitable streets of Washington these days, your editor often feels like one of the ‘former people.’ ”

Earlier from its 1946 inception until 1949, he was a regular on “Meet the Press,” first on radio, then TV. No longer, nor was he seen again on national television for another 18 years because his muckraking threatened the powerful.

It’s never easy starting out on your own, but Stone succeeded by what he called “a piggy-back launching” from the PM, Star, and Compass mailing lists as well as people who had bought his books. From them, he got 5,000 subscribers at \$5 each. During McCarthy’s heyday, he got a second-class mailing permit, and was on his way after “working in Washington for 12 years as correspondent for a succession of liberal and radical papers.”

Biographer Myra MacPherson (from All Governments Lie!) said he “went from a young iconoclast in the 1930s to an icon during the Vietnam War. In the fifties, he spoke to mere handfuls who dared surface to protest Cold War loyalty oaths and witch-hunts. A decade later, he spoke to half a million who massed for anti-Vietnam War rallies. (Deservedly) He became world famous.”

Earlier, he supported Progressive Party nominee Henry Wallace in the 1948 presidential election campaign, civil liberties for everyone, including communists, and advocated for

peace and co-existence with the Soviets. He fought the loyalty purge, FBI, House Un-American Activities Committee, Senator Pat McCarran's virulent anti-communism as Senate Judiciary Committee and Internal Security Subcommittee chairmen, and Joe McCarthy.

He wrote the first article against the Smith Act for its 1940 use against Trotskyites and other leftists with suspected subversive leanings.

His idea was to make the Weekly radical by providing information readers could check out on their own. He "tried to dig the truth out of hearings, official transcripts and government documents, and to be as accurate as possible." He wanted every issue to provide facts and opinions unavailable elsewhere in the press. He felt like "a guerilla warrior, swooping down in a surprise attack on a stuffy bureaucracy where it least expected independent inquiry."

Unlike beat reporters for major dailies or wire services, he was immune to the pressures they faced. He said Washington has lots of news. If information on some are blocked, go get others because "The bureaucracies put out so much that they cannot help letting the truth slip from the time to time." And by asking tough questions, a whole lot can be learned that as an independent can be published freely without fear of employer retribution.

It's why no bureaucracy likes independent journalism, especially radical muckrakers digging out the most sensitive material it wants suppressed. The fault Stone found with most newspapers wasn't the absence of dissent. It was the absence of real news, the timidity of journalists to write it, and the power owners held over them.

"Their main concern is advertising. The main interest of our society is merchandising. All the so-called communications industries are primarily concerned not with communications, but with selling." Most newspaper owners are businessmen, not journalists. "The news is something which fills spaces left over by advertisers."

Most publishers aren't just hostile to dissent, they suspect any opinions likely to antagonize readers, consumers, and mainly advertisers. As a result, most newspapers "stand for nothing. They carry prefabricated news, prefabricated opinion, and prefabricated cartoons." Even the best papers are timid. They don't question the Cold War, arms race, or stand up for civil liberties and the rule of law. Only a few "maverick" dailies are around making it "easy for a one-man four-page Washington paper to find news the others ignore, and of course opinion they would rarely express."

Journalism was a "crusade" for Stone. What Jefferson symbolized for him was being "rediscovered in a socialist society as a necessity for good government." During the height of the McCarthy era, he felt like a pariah but believed he stood for and was preserving the best of America's traditions. It inspired what he did to the end.

DD Guttenplan's "American Radical: The Life and Times of IF Stone"

Guttenplan described him as a journalistic "irritant to power for his uncanny ability to seize on the most inconvenient truths and for his vociferous opposition to the existing order." After becoming radicalized, he was brash, forthright, anti-fascist, pro-labor, a supporter of New Deal politics, and a passionate activist for the oppressed, disadvantaged, and social justice.

In his preface, Guttenplan described the fateful December 12, 1949 moment when Stone

went from prominence to a non-person in American politics and his profession. It was during an interchange with the AMA's Dr. Morris Fishbein on Meet the Press, an ardent foe of universal single-payer health insurance he denounced as "socialistic." Quoting Stone, Guttenplan wrote:

"Dr. Fishbein, let's get nice and rough. In view of his advocacy of compulsory health insurance, do you regard Mr. Harry Truman as a card-carrying communist, or just a deluded fellow-traveler?"

After that, he slowly vanished, was never again on Meet the Press, couldn't get his passport renewed after a year in Paris as foreign correspondent for the Compass, and when it closed in 1952 was blacklisted as a reporter. As he put it at age 40: "I feel for the moment like a ghost." And as Guttenplan wrote:

"For some time he live(d) in a kind of internal exile (sitting) in (a) Washington, DC....rented office waiting for the phone to ring (and) after three years (getting no) visitor apart from building maintenance workers and the mailman....(so he gave) up the office....work(ed) from home," and launched the IF Stone Weekly as a platform to produce radical commentaries for his readers...."slowly, almost imperceptibly, his audience return(ed)" to its final year 1971 peak 70,000 circulation level.

According to Guttenplan, Stone "rode into battle not as a paladin of the powerless or a gadfly, but as an insider, a confidential agent of the (left-wing) 'party within a party' that served" progressive politics in the 1930s. He later broke with Harry Truman and supported Wallace. The FBI followed him everywhere, investigated him for five years, and accumulated 6,000 pages in his file, threefold its size for Al Capone. His phone was tapped and his mail intercepted on suspicion he was a Soviet spy, that was, of course, untrue.

By 1970, he was invited in from the cold and given a special George Polk Award in journalism. He got honorary degrees from American University, Brown, Colby, and others, including a baccalaureate and doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania where he dropped out before graduating.

His numerous awards included:

- Newspaper Guild of New York Honors Page One Must for his book, "Underground to Palestine" - written before his views about Israel changed after the 1967 war;
- The Eleanor Roosevelt Award;
- the National Press Club Journalists' Journalist Award
- ACLU Award;
- the Professional Freedom and Responsibility Award of the Association for Education In Journalism & Mass Communications;
- Columbia University Journalism Award; and
- on March 5, 2008, The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University announced an annual IF Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence award and an IF Stone Workshop on Strengthening Journalistic Independence.

In his name, the annual Izzy Award is presented to “an independent outlet, journalist, or producer for contributions to our culture, politics, or journalism created outside traditional corporate structures.”

Three of Stone’s great quotes were:

One of several versions of his saying “All governments are run by liars and nothing they say should be believed.”

“The only kinds of fights worth fighting are those you are going to lose, because somebody has to fight them and lose and lose and lose until someday, somebody who believes as you do wins....”

“You’ve really got to wear a chastity belt in Washington to preserve your journalistic virginity. Once the secretary of state invites you to lunch and asks your opinion, you’re sunk.” Not Stone. His honor and integrity weren’t for sale.

In a June 19 – 25, 2009 Counterspin interview, Guttenplan said Stone was never ideologically rigid, and would always change his views in light of new information. He:

“never pretended to be a liberal. He was an unashamed radical, and in a way, the most important way in which he matters is he shows us, he reminds us what’s possible. He reminds us what the left can do. He reminds us what our country can do. He reminds us what our government can do if we keep on its back and we make sure it delivers on its promises.”

And he showed how good journalism can make a difference, the kind so lacking then and now with no IF Stone around to write it.

He “challenged power by using power’s own record against itself.” And after his hearing failed, he relied increasingly on documents to prove what he famously said:

“All governments lie, but the truth still slips out from time to time,” and it’s up to good journalists to find and report it. Stone did, what the powerful wanted suppressed in his Weekly and numerous books, including (a treasured signed used copy this writer owns of) his “Hidden History of the Korean War.”

Published in 1952, Monthly Review co-founders Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy wrote in the preface:

“This book....paints a very different picture of the Korean War – one, in fact, which is at variance with the official version at almost every point.” Stone’s investigations into official discrepancies led him “to a full-scale reassessment of the whole” war.

First published, in part, in the Compass and two articles in France’s L’Observateur, its publisher, Claude Bourdet explained in his article titled, “The Korean Mystery: Fight Against a Phantom?”

“If Stone’s thesis corresponds to reality (and it did), we are in the presence of the greatest swindle in the whole of military history....not a question of a

harmless fraud but of a terrible maneuver in which deception is being consciously utilized to block peace at a time when it is possible.”

Stone called it international aggression. So did Huberman and Sweezy writing in August 1951 (14 months into the war):

“....we have come to the conclusion that (South Korean president) Syngman Rhee deliberately provoked the North Koreans in the hope that they would retaliate by crossing the parallel in force. The northerners (who wanted a unified Korea, not war) fell neatly into the trap.” Truman was the instigator who took full advantage when they did, as Stone believed in writing:

“we said we were going to Korea to go back to the status quo before the war but when the American armies reached the 38th parallel they didn’t stop, they kept going, so there must be something else. We must have another agenda here and what might that agenda be?”

The same one, he later learned, we had in Vietnam that made him outspoken against it. He was the only journalist asked to speak at the first nationwide November 15, 1969 “Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam War,” that half a million to Washington one month after a global event was held.

He matched his anti-war spirit with his support for the disadvantaged, the oppressed, social equity, and above all accuracy and truth, and used his journalism as a “crusade” to produce it. He wrote:

“I was heartened by the thought that I was preserving and carrying forward the best in America’s traditions, that in my humble way I stood in a line that reached back to Jefferson. These are the origins and the preconceptions, the hopes and the aspirations” behind all his writings and the legacy that’s now ours.

On June 17, 1989, he died of heart failure in Cambridge, MA and is buried there at Mount Auburn Cemetery, leaving behind his wife, Esther, of 60 years, and three children, Celia, Jeremy and Christopher. He once told his wife that “if (he) lived long enough (he’d) graduate from a pariah to a character, and then if (he) lasted long enough, from a character to public institution.” He omitted a legend, a committed radical, consummate independent, and ideological hero symbolizing what Public Affairs’ Peter Osnos called his “stubborn tenacity, ferocious independence, and extraordinary will” in pursuing truth.

Or as Guttenplan ended his book:

“IF Stone wrote not to create a sensation, or to promote himself (or his ‘brand’), but to change the world. We read and work – and wait.”

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