

MARY MCGRORY: EVOLUTION OF A NEWSPAPERWOMAN

By Mary McGrory
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Katharine Graham died as she lived, doing what only she would have seen as her duty, attending a business conference in Idaho. The preeminent personage in American journalism spared herself nothing. The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins described her well: "Strung by duty ... Strained to beauty."

I first met Katharine Graham when she was the doting wife of Philip Graham, a brilliant, volatile Florida lawyer, whom her father chose to be publisher of the Post. I was working for the Star at the time. Phil thought I should come over to the Post. I didn't think so, but she had me to dinner anyway, to those fabled, dazzling affairs where I sat next to notables whom I had no other chance of meeting, especially if I had written rude things about them.

By the early '60s, her marriage was collapsing. Phil Graham, diagnosed with manic depression, had noisily taken up with another woman. Publicly humiliated, Kay was heartbroken, but she held her head high, kept giving dinners, as was expected of her. One night is etched in memory. John Walker, the late director of the National Gallery, was seated opposite me and I was recounting my difficulties in bringing an elderly, art-loving nun from Baltimore to see the Mona Lisa — I have no sense of direction. John was laughing and Kay appeared to be laughing, too, but her eyes were brimming with tears and she had to tilt her head back to keep them from spilling.

After Phil died, Kay, with her usual conscientiousness, set about training herself to run the paper, even though the men in charge advised her just to sign the documents they brought her. That was not her way. As part of her self-education, she came out on the campaign trail with Barry Goldwater. We sat together, and she was an endearing companion. She was humble about "the professional writers" around her — she was later to write them into the ground with the stunning autobiography — and readily joined in the foolishness that is always aboard campaign planes. At one stop, we sat on railroad ties

— there was no place else — and she confided her dread of having to speak at the Post Christmas party. Couldn't she just greet them at the door? I asked. No, she said sadly, she had to do what Phil would have done, even though the thought of speaking in public made her ill.

From across town, I watched the evolution of the "doormat wife" — her phrase — into the daring, resolute newspaperwoman. At the Star, we heard tales of her unsuspected business acumen; we knew the hiring of Ben Bradlee, a WASP with pizzazz, meant trouble for us — we had no idea how much.

Watergate whipped us at the Star. We couldn't catch up with the fleet-footed Woodward and Bernstein. Kay was the miracle to me. Was Katharine Graham really taking on Richard Nixon and his cutthroats? She was no bomb-thrower, not even a rebel. She was conventional, close to the establishment. But she endured anatomic threats from the attorney general. She had power and money, but she was a woman alone. She had her hair done in New York, she bought her clothes in Paris, but she was vulnerable. She expected to be on civil terms with every president. But there she was, betting her newspaper and her family fortunes on two 28-year-old reporters. The bet paid off and she and Bradlee brought down a president. The doormat had become an ornament to the newspaper business, a journalistic immortal, the most elegant one in the pantheon.

But her trials were not over. A strike of pressmen tested her as never before. Violence broke out. She took on the unions for 139 days. She agonized endlessly at night, after long days taking classified ads and doing other chores. Meg Greenfield told me. "I told her once, 'You don't have to do this, you know,'" words that always fell on deaf ears in her case.

In 1981, the Star died, and finally I came to the Post. Kay told me she thought that Phil, "wherever he is, is pleased." For me, it was a different world. At the Star, we did no end of laughing — perhaps more than consonant with survival. At the Post people took themselves seriously.

Kay and I never talked about it, but at a dinner given for me at the Press Club, she made a speech that was funny and sharp and gave the evening a splendid edge. She recounted my several refusals to join her paper; she reproached me for failing to love the Post as I loved the Star. I was delighted, if only because she had taken it all in and had paid us all the high compliment of speaking her mind. Back came a long letter I could barely manage to read, full of apologies and explanations. Self-doubt was back. It was, as ever, out of place. Katharine Graham was a valiant woman. It was an honor to be on her newspaper.