

# ie spotlight

## Kay Graham and the road to power

**Power, Privilege and the Post:**  
The Katharine Graham Story  
By Carol Felsenthal  
Putnam, 511 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by Linda Simon  
Author of biographies of Thornton  
Wildier and Alice B. Toklas



Katharine Graham

Once, relaxing on a beach in Barbados, Katharine Graham, publisher of the Washington Post and Newsweek, noticed one of her editors sitting elsewhere on the beach. "Why don't you come to my end ... and maybe the sun will come out," Graham suggested. The editor moved and—as if on cue—the sun suddenly broke through the clouds. "This is why they call me the most powerful woman in Washington," Graham said.

As publisher of the Washington Post, Graham did, indeed, wield enormous power—in the nation's capital and throughout the world as well. She was courted by political leaders, social luminaries, media celebrities. The only female head of a Fortune 500 company, she was worth some \$490 million by the time she retired in 1991. Besides the Post and Newsweek, her financial interests included the International Herald Tribune, four television stations, 53 cable television systems, the Washington Post/Los Angeles Times News Service and Cowles Media.

But as Carol Felsenthal shows in this engrossing new biography, Graham never felt certain of her power. As a public speaker, she became so nervous that, according to a colleague, she needed her notes to say "Welcome." She hated to travel, certain that she would make a fool of herself in the presence of a foreign dignitary. As a publishing executive, she was often indecisive, tended to listen to the last person who spoke with her and had little confidence in her own opinions. "She's so flexible," a colleague said, "that the shape doesn't take any substance until a lot of forces put it together."

Although she lived and worked at the center of international politics, Graham brought to her position no background in history, foreign affairs or political analy-

feminist, a political pundit, a visionary—that make "Power, Privilege and the Post" such a remarkable story. All Graham wanted, says Felsenthal, was "to please." She wanted to run her family's paper well enough so that no one could accuse her of bumbling. And perhaps she wanted to prove to herself that she was not the inept, unworthy person that her mother, and later her husband, thought she was.

Graham's father, Eugene Meyer, made millions on Wall Street before turning to a career in public service. Although he was a kindly presence, he rarely was available for his sons and daughters. Graham's mother, Agnes Meyer, was a selfish woman who ignored her children in favor of the famous men whose friendships she cultivated: Rodin, Thomas Mann, John Dewey and Adlai Stevenson were only a few of her social conquests. Agnes did not only ignore Katharine, however; she deliberately belittled her.

When Graham married, she chose a man whom friends called "Agnes Meyer in men's clothes." Phil Graham was a brilliant young lawyer, dazzlingly handsome, personable, magnetic. Although Graham apparently adored her husband, Phil could be chillingly cruel to his wife. He attacked her appearance, her intelligence, her behavior. "Do you know the first thing Kay does every morning?" he was fond of asking dinner guests. "She looks in the mirror and says how lucky she is to be married to me."

It seemed inevitable, even to Kay Graham, when Eugene Meyer bestowed the Washington Post upon his son-in-law. Phil used the newspaper as the seat of his own political machinations, and these became the focus of his attention during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. By 1960, when Phil was 45, he was

## Graham

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now faced the prospect of running her family's publishing empire alone. She was frightened, as well she might have been.

"She knew nothing about anything," said Phil Graham's friend and Time magazine editor Richard Clurman. "She wasn't even a Washington socialite. She seemed a pleasant woman whom you sympathized with [for] being married to this electrifying, kinetic figure."

Her staff, at both the Post and Newsweek, did not take her seriously, nor did she take herself seriously. Instead, she saw herself as an interim manager. But the Post needed a firm hand. Graham saw that she could not avoid making decisions, and within a year, friends saw a considerable change in the woman that many had described as a "big brown wren."

Under Graham's stewardship, the Post evolved from being a local paper addressed to a limited constituency to one of the country's most respected periodicals. If Graham's decision-making seemed tentative to many of her employees, still she managed to take a position on significant issues. Her first bold move was to hire the redoubtable Ben Bradlee as executive editor of the Post; the second, eight years later, was to publish the Pentagon Papers. By the time Watergate surfaced in 1972, Graham had firmly charted the Post's course.

"As the years passed," Felsenthal tells us, "it would be Kay Graham who would be credited—or discredited—for the toppling of Richard Nixon." The Post's role in publicizing the Watergate scandal made the newspaper, and Graham herself, central to national politics.

An invitation to Graham's house became as coveted as an invitation to the White House—where, incidentally, she often dined. She was a confidante of Lyndon Johnson, and expected the same from Jimmy Carter. When she spoke, presidents and political pundits listened. So did voters: "That the Post elected Marion Barry [as mayor of Washington] was beyond dispute," Felsenthal writes, noting that Barry was running third before the newspaper began its favorable editorials.

From the time she took over the Post, Graham has been the subject of abundant rumors about her influence and manipulations. Although she professed a "hands-off-the-editorial-side policy," her presence was felt strongly at both the Post and Newsweek. Joe Laitin, a former Post writer, said that she influences people more because of who she is than what she says. She is, Laitin added, "the five-hundred-pound gorilla and it is wise simply to avoid provoking

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Although she lived and worked at the center of international politics, Graham brought to her position no background in history, foreign affairs or political analysis. As one editor put it, "If you get into a discussion with the lady about anything serious, it's not going to last very long, because she's out of her depth immediately." Nor was she a feminist. Women and the professional or personal issues they raised simply did not interest her. Men's esteem and respect did.

Indeed, it is all the things that Graham was not—ambitious, a



Katharine Graham

feminist, a political pundit, a visionary—that make "Power, Privilege and the Post" such a remarkable story. All Graham wanted, says Felsenthal, was "to please." She wanted to run her family's paper well enough so that no one could accuse her of bumbling. And perhaps she wanted to prove to herself that she was not the inept, unworthy person that her mother, and later her husband, thought she was.

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It seemed inevitable, even to Kay Graham, when Eugene Meyer bestowed the Washington Post upon his son-in-law. Phil used the newspaper as the seat of his own political machinations, and these became the focus of his attention during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. By 1960, when Phil was 45, he was, according to the New York Times, "the embodiment of every young newspaperman's dream of glory." Not only did he preside over a major newspaper, but he had also just bought Newsweek. Three years later he was dead. His dazzling energy had masked years of manic-depressive illness that finally ended in suicide.

Forty-six-year-old Kay Graham

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In "Power, Privilege, and the Post," Carol Felsenthal has given us more than a biography of a single woman. This is a book that places its subject within a swirling context of newspaper publishing and American politics and help us understand the power and privileges of the media in our time.