

# Katharine Graham and me

By Carol Felsenthal

As Katharine Graham's biographer, I have watched with interest and frustration the media celebration surrounding the recent appearance of her memoir, "Personal History."

Every morning brings another fawning review of Mrs. Graham's book and career. Almost all pay tribute to the 79-year-old owner of The Washington Post and Newsweek as a fearless champion of the First Amendment. I wait in vain for someone even to hint at the other side of Kay Graham; to ask why she has behaved like such a bully, a censor even, any time someone has dared to write anything about her that falls short of a certifiable puff piece.

I take a back seat to no one in saluting Kay Graham's courage in publishing the Pentagon Papers and in pursuing Watergate. I said so unequivocally in my book, "Power, Privilege, and the Post: The Katharine Graham Story," published by Putnam in 1993. But a champion of the First Amendment? Not always.

I am Mrs. Graham's second biographer. Deborah Davis' "Katherine the Great" was published 14 years before my book. Mrs. Graham loathed the Davis version, as she loathed mine. In cahoots with her executive editor, Ben Bradlee, Mrs. Graham pulled out a lot of stops until William Jovanovich, then running Ms. Davis' publisher, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, shamefully buckled and ordered the book swept from the shelves and shredded.

Mrs. Graham fails to mention that incident in her book; all the details are in mine. It was a big cause among certain writers' groups at the time, made bigger because this, after all, was a supposed journalist

who had prompted the obliteration of a book about a newspaper and its publisher. Mrs. Graham was justifiably denounced, but that disgraceful episode has been almost completely ignored in the puffery that has passed for reporting on "Personal History."

Mrs. Graham was more subtle in her response to "Power, Privilege, and the Post," which had been published to reviews both positive and plentiful. But, in the end, she was still effective. When Vanity Fair published an excerpt, I heard from my editor and agent that Mrs. Graham was livid. But hers is the ultimate Washington insider story, and we knew that The Washington Post, of all papers, would have to review it. The editor of The Post's Sunday book section, Nina King, assigned it to Ronald Steel, Walter Lippman's biographer, and Mr. Steel wrote an admiring review. Poor Nina King; even I would have forgiven her had she prayed hard that Mr. Steel would pan rather than praise my book. Mrs. Graham was reportedly furious with Ms. King, but she didn't order the review killed, which is to her credit. On the other hand, she really couldn't have done that. Somebody would have leaked it, and it would have turned into an embarrassing scandal.

That a writer as respected as Mr. Steel liked the book seems to have deeply shocked the family, and Mrs. Graham went to work to dampen or derail enthusiasm. We heard from Mrs. Graham's lawyer. Her daughter, Lally Weymouth, attacked me viciously on the Op-ed page of The Washington Post. The paper's editors then refused to run the Op-ed piece I wrote in response. I was informed that it would be cut to letter-to-the-editor size and run on a Saturday, the day it would have the least impact. "Forget it," I told them, and it never appeared. Mrs. Graham's son, Donald, who now runs the company, wrote a letter to the

editor of the New York Times Book Review attacking me, my book and the Pulitzer Prize winning reporter Donald L. Barlett, who reviewed it for the Times. How could he have failed to see what a bad book I had written? Mrs. Graham's intimate friend of 40 years, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "reviewed" my book for the New Republic, and, surprise, hated it. The magazine's editors, to their credit, ran several letters from people, myself included, outraged that Mr. Schlesinger was assigned to review an unauthorized biography of a close friend who was known to despise the book.

When several newspapers and magazines reported that Ted Turner's company was making a television movie based on my book, I figured I was in trouble. I heard that Mrs. Graham was up in arms. The script was written and ready for final approval when the screenwriter told me that the movie was suddenly dead.

One of the more intelligent and insightful people I interviewed for the Graham biography was an editorial page writer for the New York Times who had worked for The Washington Post and knew Kay and her late husband Phil, who ran and owned the Post until he killed himself in 1963. I sent the editorial writer an early copy of the finished book. He wrote back that he had found only one trivial error. He then gave me some words of advice, which I have reread since, and which, I expect, so long as I persist in writing about media moguls—my next book is a biography of S.I. Newhouse, Jr.—I'll soon commit to memory: "If you get any rocks thrown your way, I hope you always remember that your detractors are in the business of disclosure and that the essential unfairness exposed in your pages is the immunity from scrutiny that publishers and editors are so quick to confer on their own lives."

Carol Felsenthal is the author of "Power, Privilege, and the Post: The Katharine Graham Story."

imental science. False confidence on the part of those maintaining the stockpile cannot be checked without the experimental truths provided by testing.

In addition, treaty proponents have backed a certification process for a stockpiled nuclear weapon that will involve the political labo-

be overruled; they will have no proof from tests either. In time, when the euphoria over a new treaty wanes and there is a more realistic appraisal process, the question becomes, "How will we know whether we are bluffing?" Bluff takes on a much broader dimension. In response to a rogue

political bluff of the past?

As potential adversaries understand this new dimension of bluff by a paper tiger, deterrence concepts will erode and the vulnerability of our nation increase. The role of nuclear testing goes far beyond the current role of setting a nice example for the world with an unverifi-