

# HOT TYPE



photo/Loren Santow

Carol Felsenthal

## The Book of Kay

Of the prejudices that have soiled America, anti-Semitism seems oddest. Our own knowledge is largely anecdotal, but once it was the mark of a Christian gentleman.

Eugene Meyer, the father of Katharine Graham of the *Washington Post*, was a Jew. "Had Eugene not been born a Jew in an age when Jews who were too powerful were suspect, his name would be known today to every schoolchild," Chicago writer Carol Felsenthal observes at the beginning of her new biography of Graham, *Power, Privilege, and the Post*.

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through, Felsenthal writes, because the new government's provisional leader, Alexander Kerensky, himself a Jew, regarded Jewish financiers as "the world's archetypal oppressive capitalists." Woodrow Wilson named him director of the War Finance Corporation, in which role he was grilled by congressional committees alarmed at "Jewish power." One congressman asked if it was not true "in the United States today that the gentiles have the slips of paper while the Jews have the lawful money?"

Calvin Coolidge asked Meyer to reorganize the Farm Loan Board. Under Herbert Hoover he ran both the Federal Reserve Board and the new Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a Depression entity Meyer himself had proposed. In 1933 Meyer bought the failing *Washington Post*. Immediately he was thrown into a legal battle with the *Washington Herald* over a side of newspapering that meant nothing to him—comic strips. The *Post* prevailed, the *Herald* was ordered to discontinue the contested strips, and a brightly decorated package soon arrived at the Meyers' home. It had been sent by the executive editor of the *Herald*, the Meyers' friend Cissy Patterson. Inside was a pound of raw hamburger and a note: "So as not to disappoint you—take your pound of flesh."

Meyer didn't get it, and his wife Agnes explained. "It must be a pound of flesh for a dirty Jewish Shylock."

Meyer's 1959 funeral service was Unitarian. Felsenthal writes that his son-in-law, Phil Graham, "hissed that Kay and her dead father were nothing but kikes . . . trying to pass as Wasps." Graham was one of Washington's most brilliant young men—smarter and more charming, he told himself, than his friend John Kennedy. But he felt kept. He'd let Meyer saddle him with the *Post* when what he really wanted was a political career. Graham, a manic-depressive, turned on his wife. "Overweight, pale, dowdy, and thin-haired, Kay was Phil's most convenient target," writes Felsenthal. "His magnificent verbal agility, when aimed at a person who had sparked his anger, contempt, or self-loathing, was truly terrible." A friend told Felsenthal, "He called Kay a Jewish cow."

In 1963 Graham propped a shotgun against his head and pulled the trigger. The *Washington Post* became Kay Graham's paper.

Anti-Semitism is only one of many strands in Felsenthal's long, involving account of Kay Graham's life—a book Graham did what she could to obstruct—and we are making more of it here than the author did. Felsenthal told us that Graham was baptized an Episcopalian and may not have thought of herself as Jewish in any way until she went off to Vassar. Felsenthal believes Graham didn't make the distinctions that separate "assimilated" Jews from Jews who aren't until she became a part of Washington society.

"Religion has never been an important element in her life," Felsenthal told us. "She's really a very nonobservant person. But what I think has harmed her is this inability to see beyond how a person looks or dresses or decorates her home. She didn't like short Jews. But she also didn't like one [Washington Post Company] president who was a very successful president, Mark Meagher. He's short and kind of sloppily dressed and has no sense of personal style. She has a preference for what one person called tall, elegant, Christian men, but she also likes tall, elegant Jewish men who in moments of excitement don't revert back to a Queens accent.

"There was that whole business with Howard Simons," Felsenthal went on. Simons, the managing editor under Ben Bradlee, was the unsung "guts"—Felsenthal's word—behind the *Post's* Watergate investigation. "On the one hand, she recognized what a fine journalist he was, but



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Born to wealth, Meyer was tutored by James J. Corbett, the future heavyweight champion, in the ways of dealing with classmates who struck him and called him "sheeny." At Yale Meyer moved into a rooming house because the university residences refused to accept him.

Opening his own investment house, Meyer soon became very rich. "His early bouts with anti-Semitism," writes Felsenthal, "had left him determined to avoid that scourge rather than fight it, and marrying a Jewish woman would not advance that goal." He courted a willowy, affected gentile several inches taller and 12 years younger than he was, and a Lutheran pastor married them. Yet he remained who he was. When he built his estate, neighbors let him know he could expect to be "snubbed socially."

As the United States entered World War I, Meyer turned to public service. A place on a mission to Russia fell

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An anecdote in Felsenthal's book has Graham turning in revulsion from an office television on which a *Post* editor, apparently Simons, was being interviewed. "He's sure a schlump," she told the others in her office. "He's so Jewish." And she's said to have dismissed her late husband's psychiatrist as "our little Jewish dentist."

Graham became, a *Post* attorney who was Jewish told Felsenthal, "in some ways almost prototypically WASPish." That is no mark against her courage as the newspaper owner who published the Pentagon papers and stood behind her paper during Watergate. Michael Jack-

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## Queer Opinions

Watched from a certain perspective, the *Frontline* special on J. Edgar Hoover last Tuesday was a textbook study of the heights a man can reach, whatever the damage to himself and others, by denying his homosexuality.

No one pretends there aren't plenty of gays in the military; and we wonder if some advocates of the formal rule against them are less concerned about letting gays in than about letting the ones already in out of the closet. They may worry that this would change military culture while blunting the edge of some of the nation's fiercest sublimating warriors.

At any rate, it's been a healthy debate. In mid-January Mike Royko weighed in. Royko, an Air Force veteran, endorsed the ban. He predicted that lifting it will damage "morale and discipline," and he quoted approvingly from an earlier *Tribune* op-ed piece. "We're caught in a propaganda war being waged by the media and gay lobbyists," Lieutenant Colonel Robert Maginnus had written.

But that's the least of what he'd written. In its entirety, Maginnus's essay struck many gays like a bucket of homophobic slime. "Although gays make up perhaps 2 percent of our general population, they commit more than one-third of all reported child molestations," declared Maginnus, providing no sources. "They are 18 times more likely to incorporate youth into their sexual practices."

Jon-Henry Damski, a *Windy City Times* columnist of Royko's generation, read Royko's column and sent us a letter. "I am tired of writing about him," he told us. "You, please, pick up the ball."

But we didn't pick it up. We disagreed with Royko's column, and we think his discomfort consistently overrides his judgment on gay issues. But the *Tribune* has allowed many voices to speak on the gay ban and several of them—such as those of Clarence Page, Jon Margolis, and the paper's own editorial page—have taken Damski's side. If Royko thinks differently, he's entitled.

Because we did nothing, Damski reluctantly took Royko on again.

"Mike Royko, like a tired old volcano, has belched up another anti-gay column filled with bigotry and prejudice. He is against gays being 'in this man's army.'" Damski dismissed Royko as "a sad, pathetic, and isolated case."

He then sent us another letter. "When I didn't hear from you," he told us, "I went ahead and wrote a contra-Royko column in my usual antirational style."

Afterward we talked to both of them. "Yes, there's better coverage across the board," Damski told us. "But families read what Royko says, and he transcends the editorial policy of the paper. Mothers of gay sons still clip Royko and give the columns to their sons. Royko's the voice of Chicago. He speaks with more force and authority on some subjects than either the mayor or the cardinal.

"I'd hesitate to call him a bigot or homophobe. Many in the [gay] community do. My worry is he's a voice taken very seriously, and therefore his strong attacks on gays hurt more, because a lot of people growing up in Chicago want to believe him. I can't dismiss him because I respect other things he's written.

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"I was a bit strong. . . . But waiters, people on the street, a lot of people my age [55] came to me. . . . What he writes hurts the little people I run into. I'm glad the *Tribune* has other voices, but they're weak voices."

Royko, like Damski, was temperate in conversation. "I find myself on the side of those who oppose gays in the military," he told us. "Although if they do it, I'm not going to lose any sleep over it."

Royko was stationed in Korea in the early 50s. "I have sympathy with gays who were in when I was in," he said. "They used to court-martial them, put them in the stockade, and run them out. I knew a couple of gays who were known to be gay, but nobody ever did anything. One of them was a war hero and kind of a drunk. He'd only get forward when he had a few pops, but he was a nice guy."

We asked Royko if an end to the ban is a done deal. "Oh, sure," he said. "It's going to happen."

—MICHAEL MINER