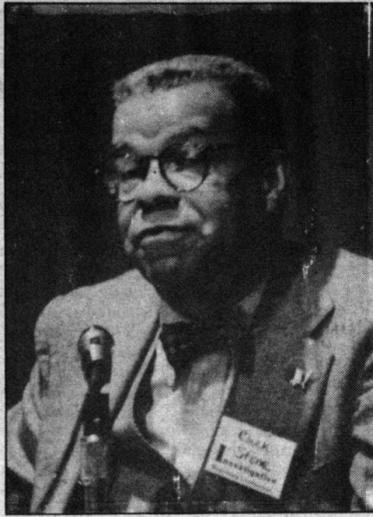




Bob Woodward



Jack Anderson



Chuck Stone



Richard Viguerie

photos Peter Michalyshyn and Phil Soper

"Is there too much investigative zeal or not enough? What is this business about positive stories, where are the 'upbeat' stories? Is the press too powerful?"

"There are a number of journalists, George Will among them, who say that we also have to consider ourselves citizens and as citizens there are certain adversary positions that we should not take."

"In all my travels over the last 35 years I have never met a person who wants to go to the Soviet Union to live. Wherever I go, the United States is condemned, criticized, denounced, and then the critics come up and ask about our immigration policy. You see, out there they know..."

"You've heard about muck-rakers. Well, we need to keep raking the muck, because there is a swamp of human existence out there."

"Once you perform the surgery, you've got to prescribe a cure. We've got to get involved more in prescribing cures and providing direction society should take."

"I feel that the personal priorities and philosophy of the reporter is basically the way the story gets run. If the reporter is interested and his priority is in fraud and overruns in the Pentagon, that's where he is going to look. He is not going to beat a path down to the social welfare agencies and look for waste and fraud and overruns in health and human services."

Muckraking backfires on Washington media

Life has not been so good for the American media establishment lately. Last year Janet Cooke and the *Washington Post* pulled off one of the biggest hoaxes in recent journalistic history, printing a story about an eight year old heroin addict that proved to be a total fabrication, but only after it won a Pulitzer Prize. Last year too the *Washington Star*, one of the best U.S. papers, closed down because it couldn't compete with the *Post* for readership and still make sufficient profits. And very recently, President Reagan accused the television networks and print media of being sensational, superficial, and indiscriminantly critical of government and of the nation. *Gateway* editor Peter Michalyshyn and Students' Union president Phil Soper visited Washington D.C. recently for the second annual Ralph Nader conference on Investigative Reporting. The conference was interesting enough, but the real topics of the weekend were the three above. Here is one report.

by Peter Michalyshyn

"The scandal simply would not go away," wrote *Time* magazine's press critic Thomas Griffith after the Janet Cooke hoax. The 25 year old black junior reporter had won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for a sensational story about Jimmy, an eight year old dope addict. The story was a fake. It was a well written fictionalization that fooled even the *Post's* Pulitzer-winning Watergate media star Bob Woodward, the paper's editor in charge of local news at the time, and other senior staff who had not bothered to verify the front page story.

For days after it broke, the media establishment covered before its readers and viewers and cursed itself for the hoax. But for all their self criticism, the media maintained the Janet Cooke affair was essentially an honest mistake. *Newsweek*

wrote, "There is nothing more important to journalists and journalism than credibility; writers seemed slightly indignant that readers would not believe that what newspapers and television produced most of the time, if not all the time, was true. But a *Newsweek* Gallup poll showed only five per cent of Americans believed everything they read in the U.S. (and therefore the world) media; 52 per cent said they believed the media "only some" of the time; 33 per cent said that thought the U.S. media "often make things up."

As if on cue, the public's skepticism was vindicated by a rash of media indiscretions: 24 year old *New York Daily News* award winning columnist Michael Daly resigned for writing a fictional account of brutal British soldiers in Belfast who fired plastic bullets at the

heads of innocent children.

French broadcasting crews were discovered hiring children from Belfast streets to re-enact petrol bomb and stone throwing acts of violence for the television audiences at home; viewers at home, of course, had no idea if what they were watching was spontaneous, or created.

Back at the *Washington Post*, which critic Alastair Cooke once described as "suffering from radiation, or smart ass, sickness" after overlong exposure to Nixon and Co., was falling over itself apologizing for a gossip column item that claimed a U.S. federal government residence was bugged while President Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy stayed there prior to the inauguration, and implicitly accused president Jimmy Carter for the bugging.

The *Post* said it found the Carter-Reagan bugging item "utterly impossible to believe."

Not to be left unscathed in all of this, the renowned *New York Times* registered its own 'shameful act.'

24 year old free lance writer Christopher Jones admitted recently that an article he wrote about a trip with the Khmer Rouge guerillas to Cambodia was a fabrication. He had written the December 20, 1981 article for the *New York Times Magazine* without leaving his home base of Spain, and he invented the tale based on earlier visits to western Cambodia and on plagiarized passages from Andre Malreaux's *The Royal Way*, a

novel set in Cambodia.

The *Times* claimed it had not followed its customary procedure of verifying any article on a specialized subject with one of its own specialists. "We regret the whole sad episode," said executive editor A.M. Rosenthal.

Whether or not this sad episode and all the others were spontaneous and coincidental, was a major topic of discussion at the Nader conference in Washington. David Halberstam, himself a Pulitzer prize winner for his Vietnam reporting, and a self-styled media critic, claimed the rash of media felonies could be traced to the post-Watergate glamorization of the news profession.

The Janet Cooke affair was a "portrait of a woman who went up too fast," in the intensely competitive *Washington Post*, according to Halberstam.

"Now we have a profession that attracts people viscerally interested in exercising power. Reporters are not that interested in issue, but in becoming stars," Halberstam wrote recently.

Barbara Cohen, vice president of news for U.S. National Public Radio:

"Why is our profession attracting people who think it's okay to make things up?"

On the panels there were 10,000 and one answers to that question, from the increasing appeal of media celebrity-star status, to more intense competition for

continued on page 12

First Sidebar

U.S. President Reagan threw a tantrum at the American media recently, if only briefly.

Reagan complained that the press' constant "downbeat" negativism was psychologically worsening the public morale and could be stalling economic recovery of the nation.

"In a time of recession like this there's a great element of psychology in economics," Reagan said in an interview with the *Oklahoma City Daily Oklahoman*.

In another interview with *T.V. Guide* magazine, Reagan criticized the television coverage of the recent El Salvadorean elections; these criticisms were repeated by senior White House staff, most notably press director David Gergen.

"Is it news," Reagan asked, "that some fellow in South Succotash someplace has just been laid off that he should be interviewed nation wide?"

In Succotash Road, Rhode Island, the

Washington Post found three women who had been laid off in the last year. The unemployment rate had jumped two points and the overall unemployment rate in Rhode Island was almost ten per cent.

The press attacked Reagan soundly for his alleged insensitivity. The *Post* wrote: "Unfortunately, it is not news, not news in the sense of being either distinctive or uncommon. They're being laid off in East Succotash and North Succotash and in West Baked Potato... There is, in short, much hardship proceeding from parts of the president's program, and much anxiety of worse things to come."

Shortly afterwards, Reagan said in a speech that there must only have been a "little momentary frustration or misunderstanding" between himself and reporters.

It was left to *New York Times* columnist James Reston to perceive: "Any day now, he (Reagan) will probably be proclaiming that Succotash is his favorite vegetable."

Former Student Union president Phil Soper's report on the Nader journalism conference is forthcoming.

Second Sidebar

The staple of investigative reporting the confidential, unauthorized interview is under attack in America.

Reporters say if they are to probe the truth beyond "official source" journalism, they must cultivate and protect their sources. Some reporters go so far even to say they must misrepresent themselves to get at the 'real story.'

Jack Anderson, the famous American investigator and syndicated columnist, attacked government attempts to force reporters to divulge their sources.

"The authorized White House spokesman is never going to tell you anything the President doesn't want you to know," Anderson said in a speech at the Nader journalism conference.

"I have tried to move in the utilize mainly unauthorized sources. They remain confidential because if exposed they would disappear as sources," Anderson said.

Even if government succeeded in muzzling informants by threat of prosecution, Anderson says the information would still be available to 'the enemy' by word of mouth and in underground publications.

He accused 'big government' of trying really to withhold information embarrassing to it from the people.

As of February, 1982, a U.S. test-case established that news reporters cannot be forced to give up their notes unless the information therein cannot be obtained through different channels.

A bill that would legalize the naming of American secret service agents is on its way through Congress, with the support of the president.

Generally speaking, the Reagan administration is also trying to restrict access to documents through the American Freedom of Information Act.

Journalists at the Nader conference agreed that such attempts to stall the press would be met with even greater zeal to expose government fraud and corruption.

But such zealotry comes into question when it follows through to its logical extreme; as Mark Dowie, investigative editor of *Mother Jones* magazine said recently in Toronto: "I would never misrepresent myself to a source to get information... unless I had to."