

# Photojournalist Without Pity

by William McGowan

At the end of her fine biography of the enigmatic Walker Evans — the first one yet published — Belinda Rathbone describes a certain dismay among the friends and colleagues attending the seventy-one-year-old photographer's memorial service. Given the splits and far-flung qualities of Evans's busy personal life, she writes, even those who were most



PAUL GROTZ

Evans at work in 1929

intimate with him realized "there were rooms upon rooms" of Evans's life they would never know. Such a metaphor seems applicable to the public's understanding of Evans's professional life and the body of his work as well, where there are also "rooms upon rooms" not commonly appreciated.

Born into sturdy midwestern prosperity in 1903, Evans grew up in St. Louis and suburban Chicago. His father was an advertising man who later left the family for another

*William McGowan, a journalist in New York, is working on a book about identity politics and the press.*

woman. This experience, asserts Rathbone, encouraged an introspective turn in the young boy, who sought refuge in his diary and his Brownie camera. Known as a bright but inattentive student at his first East Coast prep school, Evans would eventually graduate from Phillips Andover. But he flunked out of Williams College after his first year, having spent far more time daydreaming about becoming a writer while reading in the library than putting in the hours needed to pass the required course in Latin.

## WALKER EVANS: A BIOGRAPHY

BY BELINDA RATHBONE  
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
358 PP. \$27.50.

After a short stop in New York as a clerk at the Public Library, Evans went on to Paris on his father's tab, finding it, as fellow expatriate Malcolm Cowley put it, "a great machine for stimulating the nerves and sharpening the senses."

"Evans had been raised to think of artists as forbidden fruit, and the life they led abroad as charged and erotic," writes Rathbone. But in Paris, he was just "a nobody" hovering on the edges of the literary and artistic ferment of the day, so insecure in fact that he turned down an offer to meet James Joyce at Sylvia Beach's famous bookstore, Shakespeare and Company. It was not time wasted, though. In Paris he first developed his powers of observation. "'Stare,' he advised his admirers years later," writes Rathbone, describing the legacy of his days sitting and watching in Paris cafes. "It is the only way to educate your eye."

Returning to New York in the late twenties, Evans began to come into his own, socially and professionally. Befriending such notable young bohemians as the poet Hart Crane and the painter Ben Shahn, he was part of a

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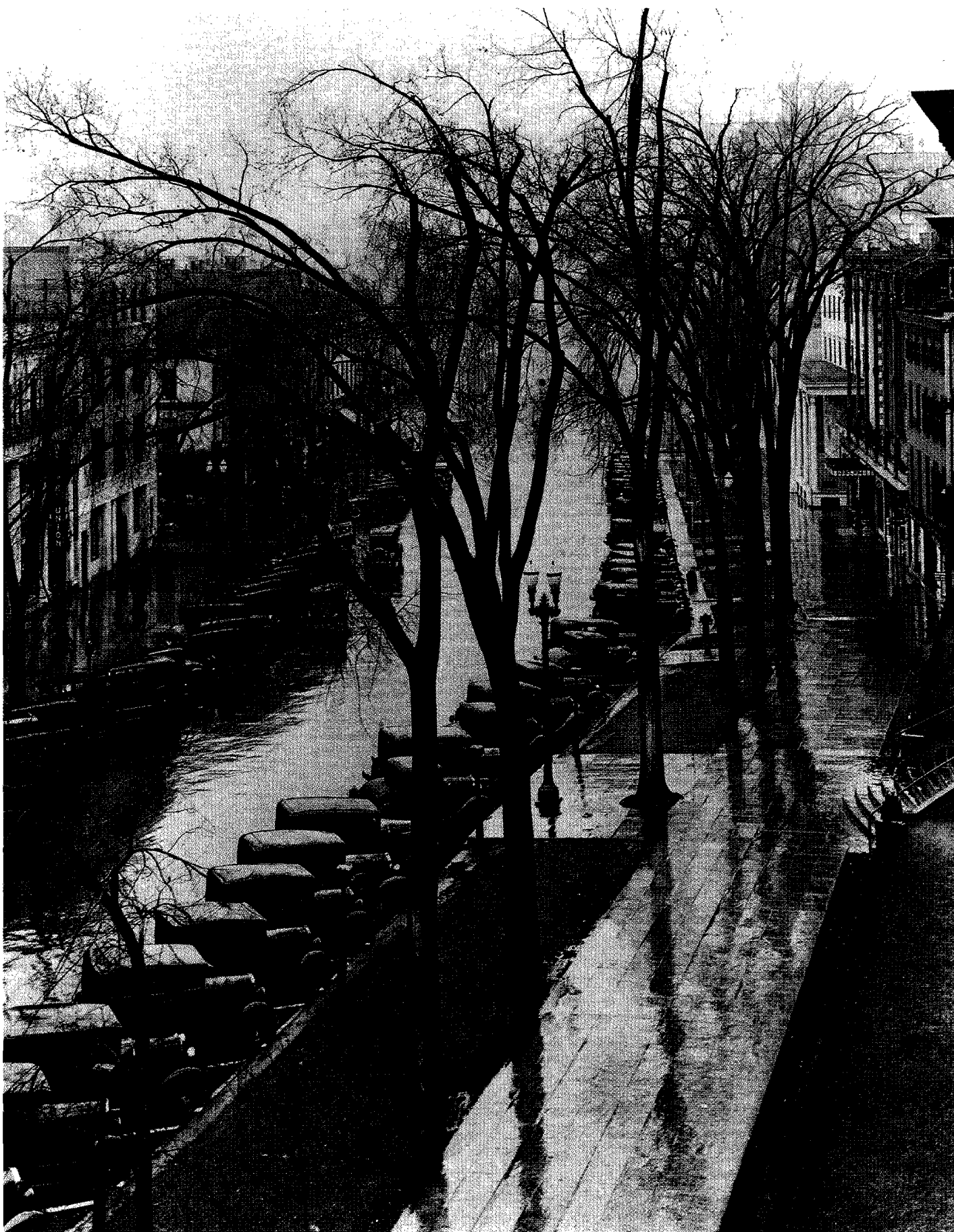
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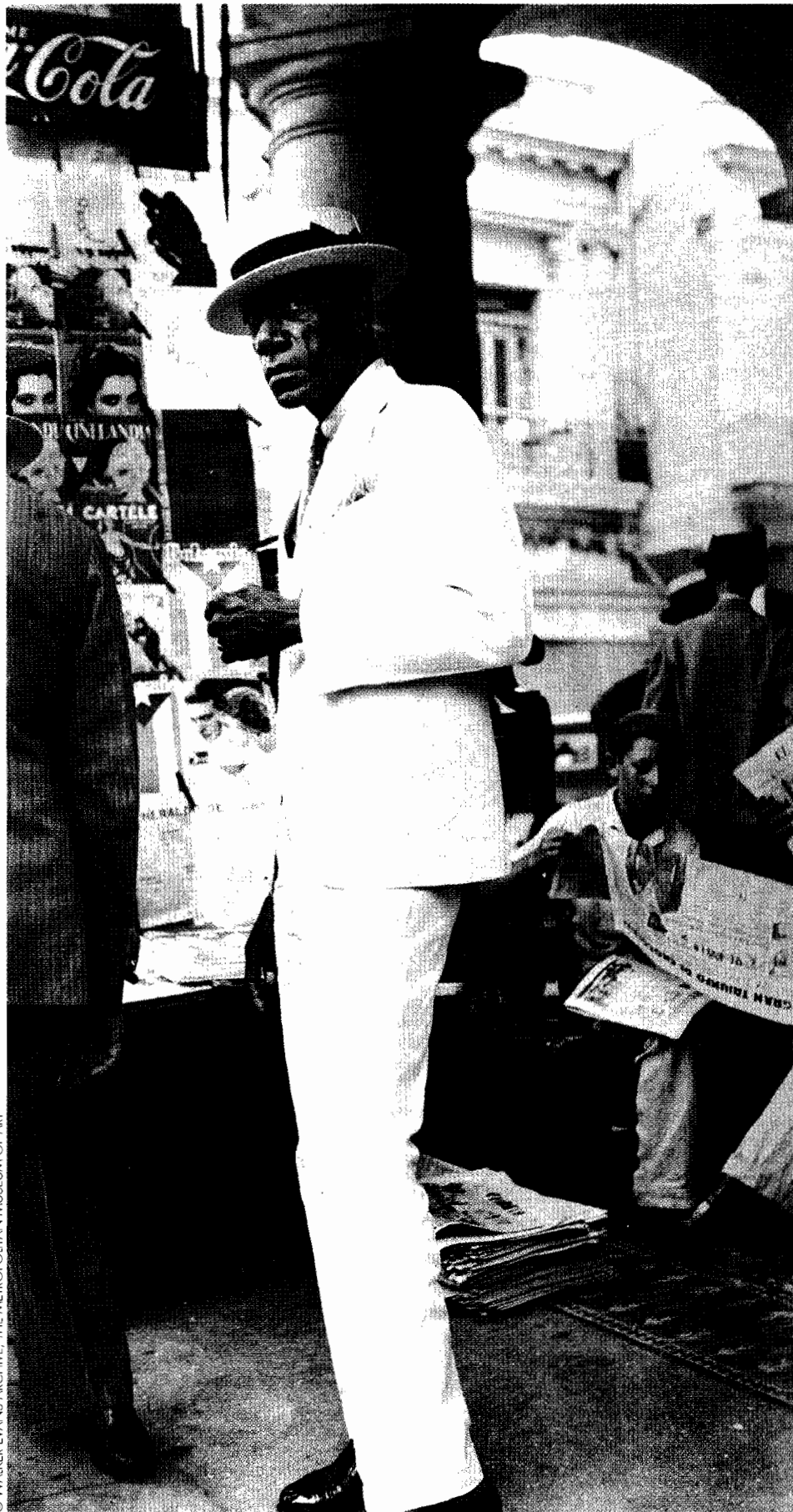
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In 1931, Evans photographed "Main Street, Saratoga Springs" (far left). Although he was most comfortable functioning as a kind of "arbiter of taste, a connoisseur of manmade America," which he did for most of his career, he remains best known for documenting Depression life

When he was sent to Cuba in 1933 to provide photographs for a book on political oppression there, he hung out with Hemingway and photographed the country's "social ambience" (near left), not its poverty

By the time (1929) he photographed a crowd gathered at a rural sports field (following page), he had already developed his own personal aesthetic: a Whitmanesque devotion to the "expressive potential of the ordinary"



fast, effete crowd of writers, artists, and dancers. He began to develop his own personal aesthetic — characterized by Rathbone as a Whitmanesque devotion to the “expressive potential of the ordinary.” During this period, Evans roamed the city anonymously and aimlessly, looking for any subject that he felt could reveal “candid human emotion” or capture “the coarse social weave of contemporary urban life.” It was also at this time that he began to gain recognition. His photographs accompanied the 1930 publication of Crane’s epic poem, *The Bridge*, and he was one of the first photographers hired by the fledgling Museum of Modern Art.

Evans’s relationship to journalism

and to the politics of the day was aloof and one-sided. An editor at J.B. Lippincott, apparently mistaking Evans for an aspiring magazine photographer, sent him to Cuba in 1933 to illustrate a book by the radical journalist Carleton Beals on political oppression there. But, as Rathbone notes, while Evans luxuriated in Cuba’s social ambiance and visual idiosyncrasies and hung out with Hemingway, the country’s poverty and oppression did not find its way into the book. In fact, he never even read Beals’s galleys.

Nor was Evans all that gripped by the onset of the Depression. As Rathbone tells it, rather than seeing the Crash of 1929 as a harbinger of

suffering, Evans and his feckless downtown comrades cheered at the news that businessmen were throwing themselves out of windows, seeing in such tragedy confirmation that the business world was fundamentally corrupt. Even his job as an information specialist with Rexford Tugwell’s Resettlement Administration, an important agency in FDR’s New Deal, was more a matter of opportunism than political idealism.

Evans’s style, devoid of political overstatement, drew many admirers, including the writer James Agee, who asked that Evans accompany him on an assignment for *Fortune* magazine to document the conditions of



southern tenant farmers and their families — the seminal work that was later published in book form as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee had sought Evans because he wanted straight documentary, not “hackneyed Depression propaganda” of the type that other photographers, such as Margaret Bourke-White, were producing for that other Time publication, *Life* — “all wind-blown fields and starving livestock and concerned-looking farmfolk.” To Agee, says Rathbone, Evans “was the only photographer he knew who understood that the camera could lie just as easily as it could reveal the truth.”

The assignment did not go smoothly.

The two had trouble locating the three families they had set out to find, and had a hard time piercing the small town suspicion of the people they encountered along the way. There was personal friction as well, triggered by Agee’s impatience with Evans’s slow methods of working and his self-indulgent manner. For his part, Evans wondered whether Agee was too eager to shed his sophistication and become, like the families, “a primitive.” While Agee eventually moved in with the families to better learn their experience, Evans, who often worked in dandyish white gloves, spent a few nights and then went to a hotel, leaving behind the bad food and bedbugs.

Although Evans’s memorable pictures of the three sharecropper families are meant to be sympathetic, he intended no pity. What is striking, Rathbone emphasizes, is not the poverty but the purity of the homes; she says that they argue not that poverty should be abolished but that the people should be respected for what they were. Indeed, as a *New York Times* critic would later say, Evans had nothing of the “evangelical” in his approach. “He does not carry along with him the reformer’s zeal.”

The sharecropper photos were clearly the high point of Evans’s career. Yet Rathbone’s discussion of the later periods of Evans’s life shows that it was hardly all downhill from there. With so many journalists on military leave during World War II, Evans, who dodged the draft by conveniently marrying the former wife of a friend, was able to realize his boyhood dream of becoming a writer, landing a spot at *Time* as a movie and book critic. And so while other photographers like Robert Capa and Margaret Bourke-White were risking their lives going on military operations, Rathbone observes in one of her flashes of bile, “Evans was safely tucked away with his typewriter on the fiftieth floor of the Time-Life Building at Rockefeller Center. The weekly deadline was his only threat.”

Alongside John Hersey, Whittaker Chambers, and Saul Bellow, Evans

“could not have asked for better comrades” to work or booze with. In a reminder of how much journalism has changed, she explains that, like him, most of those at *Time* saw themselves as creative artists first and journalists second. Though its style was foreign at first he soon conquered it to write with the chattiness of a master. At war’s end, he used his contacts to transfer to *Fortune*, where he was a staff photographer for the next two decades.

Functioning as a kind of “arbiter of taste, a connoisseur of manmade America,” Evans was allowed by his indulgent bosses at *Fortune* to pursue his interest in the forgotten, the idiosyncratic, and the obscure. Characteristically, he took advantage of the situation to the hilt, running up expenses and taking as much time on the road as he wanted. “He was a little on the spoiled side,” recalled one colleague, who said he tended to walk down the corridor in “his own private cloud.”

During this period, Evans enjoyed a revival among a new generation of other artists and photographers, such as Robert Frank. To them, writes Rathbone, “Evans was a model of artistic integrity. His unheroic portrayal of the American scene, his affection for the primitive and his reticence toward political statement formed a foundation upon which they might build their own photo visions.” In 1960 Houghton Mifflin decided to reprint *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and the book was “reborn like the Phoenix,” further reviving interest in Evans and his work.

But as appealing as Evans was to the budding counterculture, his “sweet tooth for the aristocratic” grew stronger as he grew older. While he would be comfortable as the aging hipster at a downtown painter’s loft party, Evans was more at home among the pipe smoke, leather armchairs, and the Anglophilic pretensions of the Century Club, making up stories of brahmin family roots and pursuing what Rathbone calls an “exaggerated sense of personal entitlement” completely beyond his means. At

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one point he used money given to him for a medical leave to buy a secondhand Jaguar. It was also a period of increased dissipation — according to Rathbone, Evans got up to a bottle of vodka a day. After subjecting his wife to much psychological abuse, he divorced, but a while later married a much younger Swiss woman with whom he began an affair while she was still married, "a situation," Rathbone tells us, "to which he was well-accustomed."

Having trouble justifying "a photographer who seemed to do whatever he pleased, if he did anything at all," his bosses at *Fortune* told him in the early 1960s he was a luxury they could no longer afford. But once again falling back on his network of well-connected friends, Evans got a teaching job at Yale.

There he warned students of the danger of nostalgia, sentiment, propaganda, and color, spoke of photography as "the most literary of arts," and roped students into helping him steal road signs for his ever more eccentric collection of American cultural artifacts. While rewarding, this period was also sad. He grew testy at always being questioned about the Depression, "as if he weren't a living artist, still churning with ideas."

Although Rathbone's portrait of Evans is hardly flattering on a personal level, she leaves no doubt about the impact and influence of his work. Describing a journalistic world with more opportunity than ours for cross-over talents like Evans, Rathbone suggests that Evans the photojournalist was only the adjunct to Evans the artist. Although he has a "self-effacing style," she observed, he left a formidable imprint on history. As Hilton Kramer's *New York Times* review of a 1971 Evans retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art put it: "For how many of us has our imagination of what the United States looked like and felt like in the 1930s been determined not by a novel or a play or a poem or a painting or even by our own memories but by the work of a single photographer, Walker Evans?"

## It Wasn't Just Watergate

by Piers Brendon

At the beginning of this notable autobiography Ben Bradlee acknowledges the help in furthering his career given by Richard Milhous Nixon. Toward the end Bradlee recalls the presence in his story conference room of a large color photograph of a smiling President Gerald Ford captioned, "To Ben Bradlee and all my friends at *The Washington Post* . . . Jerry Ford." Watergate, in short, made Bradlee the greatest editor of his day. Yet, as his wise, witty, and wonderfully entertaining book reveals, the breaking of that story was merely the crowning endeavor in a lifetime of journalistic achievement.

### A GOOD LIFE: NEWSPAPERING AND OTHER ADVENTURES

BY BEN BRADLEE  
SIMON & SCHUSTER  
514 PP. \$27.50.

Bradlee modestly attributes much of it to luck and maybe he has had more than his fair share. A Boston brahmin, he went to private school during the Depression. He recovered from polio and sailed through Harvard. He had a "good war" on destroyers in the Pacific. Afterwards he was able to buy himself a newspaper apprenticeship, helping to found and run the award-winning but short-lived *New Hampshire Sunday News*. In 1948, thanks to a rainstorm, he missed a train stop in Baltimore and went on to get a job at *The Washington Post*. According to his own account, he just chanced to be on hand to give a detailed report of a man threatening to jump from a ninth-floor window ledge and to witness an assassination attempt on President Truman. Actually, Bradlee was beginning to make his own luck.

He was also making waves. In 1949 the craven *Post* gutted his eyewitness account of the Anacostia race riots, which broke out over the issue of segregated

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