

'Intimate' portrait of Kay Graham falls far short of reality

by Daniel Platt

Power, Privilege and the Post, the Katharine Graham Story

by Carol Felsenthal

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This is an unauthorized biography, so we are to assume that it is neither a whitewash nor a coverup. However, it is clear that the author was operating under certain ground rules (perhaps bearing in mind that Kay Graham found another biography, Deborah Davis's *Katharine the Great*, unacceptable, and had it suppressed). Carol Felsenthal draws an elaborate and often entertaining portrait of the people in Kay Graham's world, depicting all of their quirks and foibles, without ever daring to comment on the moral aspects of how they have wielded their tremendous political power.

The principals of the story are Eugene Meyer, who parlayed his family connections to the famous Lazard Frères firm into a banking career that made him very, very wealthy, then retired and bought the *Washington Post*; his narcissistic wife Agnes, who used his money to cast herself in the role of patron of the arts and letters; daughter Kay, the poor little rich girl; and her husband Phil, who ran the *Post* until his untimely death, at which time Kay took over. The secondary characters are all stellar names from the overlapping worlds of politics, finance, and journalism.

Felsenthal acknowledges, sardonically, that Kay Graham represents "the aristocracy." She has dug up some hilarious quotes to that effect: One wit likens the guest roster of Kay's "coming-out party," given for her by Truman Capote after her ascension to power at the *Post*, to "an international list for the guillotine." *Post* executive editor Ben Bradlee, upon learning that another editor is having a blood transfusion, replied, "Blue, I hope." The truth, however, is that Kay Graham has counted among her closest friends and confidants some of the most prominent gangsters and genocidalists of our time: Henry Kissinger, Robert McNamara, Edward Bennett Williams, Warren Buffett. Felsenthal recounts an anecdote, originating with Kay Graham, where Kissinger was so

preoccupied about having been called a war criminal that, after sitting through a movie with Graham, he was unable to remember the plot; of course, why he was called a war criminal is outside the purview of Felsenthal's book.

The pivotal episode in any history of Katharine Graham and the *Washington Post* is the story of how she wrested control of the paper from her estranged husband, Phil Graham, at the time of his alleged suicide. Phil was a brilliant and charismatic figure, who did not represent the aristocracy, and who developed substantial political differences with it, much like his friend John F. Kennedy. Following Phil's marriage to Kay, he was given control of the paper by Kay's father. Phil built the paper into a powerful institution and acquired *Newsweek*, but he also drifted apart from Kay, personally and politically. The drift became an outright break when Phil fell in love with Australian journalist Robin Webb. He announced his intention to divorce Kay, marry Robin, and take control of the *Post* publishing empire.

It is said that Phil was also becoming increasingly unstable during this period. He was treated for manic-depression. Author Felsenthal attempts a rather precarious balancing act, vacillating between painting him as a hopelessly crazed individual, and dutifully quoting people who knew him, who comment on the brilliance and lucidity of his initiatives during this period, such as his attempt to resolve the New York City printers' strike.

At any rate, Phil made one very imprudent move when he retained Edward Bennett Williams as his attorney in the divorce case. Williams was a prominent lawyer, for reasons which are also outside the purview of Felsenthal's book: He was a leading representative of organized crime, having represented Frank Costello, the Meyer Lansky organization, and others. Williams stalled the divorce, and, after assisting Phil in drawing up a new will in March of 1963 which cut out Kay Graham and replaced her with Robin Webb, he arranged to have it suppressed. This latter fact, while documented in sources such as Robert Pack's 1983 authorized biography of Williams, is missing from Felsenthal's account. She states blandly, "The will that was probated was the one filed in 1957." The 1957 will gave control of the *Post* to Kay. Williams was hired right away to represent the *Post*, and became one of Kay's closest friends and advisers.

'Black widow'

Two events in this story remain shrouded in secrecy to this day: They are Phil's alleged suicide on Aug. 3, 1963, and his impromptu address to the Associated Press board meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, in January of the same year. What little factual information is available to the public is due to the efforts of researchers Anton Chaitkin and Stephanie Ezrol, who published a series of articles in the newspaper *New Solidarity*, affiliated with Lyndon LaRouche. The series appeared shortly before the paper was illegally shut down by the U.S. government in 1987, and was entitled

“Black Widow: The Story of Katharine Meyer Graham and Her Washington Post.”

Chaitkin and Ezrol learned that the AP board meeting was held at the Arizona Biltmore Hotel on Jan. 16-18. Phil made some unscheduled remarks at the meeting. Eyewitness accounts of what transpired vary wildly, but whatever did transpire culminated in a team of people being rushed from Washington to violently subdue Phil, inject him with sedatives, put him in a straitjacket, and fly him back East where he was committed to Chestnut Lodge, a psychiatric hospital in Rockville, Maryland. The “Black Widow” series included a survey of published accounts of this episode, all of which were demonstrably false: Some accounts place the meeting in June, so as to put it close to the time of Phil’s alleged suicide; none specify that the meeting was an AP board meeting. Felsenthal’s account follows the pattern. Although she does not give a date for the meeting, her narrative places it later than Phil’s intervention into the New York printers’ strike, when in fact it occurred earlier. She seems deliberately vague about the nature of the meeting, describing it in conjunction with another, separate meeting. She draws heavily on David Halberstam’s account in *The Powers That Be*, including the story that Phil told his fellow American publishers that he “wouldn’t wipe his a** with their papers”—a sentiment with which *EIR* readers may sympathize. Of all the journalists present, only Sarah McClendon reported on the incident. Chaitkin and Ezrol report that Associated Press was singularly uncooperative, informing investigators that the public has no right to know anything about the “internal affairs” of AP. They refused to “reveal” the names of the board of directors for 1963, where their meetings were held that year, or who might have attended a meeting that Phil Graham also attended. Nonetheless, Chaitkin and Ezrol were able to learn these things, with what they refer to as “good ‘gumshoe work.’” Felsenthal, who is clearly a tireless researcher (she even managed to correspond with Robin Webb), could have done the same.

Robin Webb was present in Phoenix. She was also present that spring in New York, when Phil intervened in the printers’ strike. However, somewhere along the line, she was eased out of the picture. Felsenthal reports, “Kay was forced to huddle with other members of the family—especially Phil’s brother Bill—and with the upper echelon of *Post* people to figure out what to do about Robin.” Robin was, of course, designated by the March 1963 will to inherit the *Post* in the event of Phil’s death. Because of the confused chronology in the various accounts, it is impossible to gather when she returned to Australia, but she did; by June 20, 1963 Phil had had some sort of reconciliation with Kay, and had also been re-admitted to Chestnut Lodge.

But, was it suicide?

On Aug. 3 he persuaded his doctors to give him a pass to go with Kay for a day to her estate near Warrenton, Virginia.



Washington Post editor Katharine Graham entering the Pierre Hotel in New York for the 60th birthday party celebration of Henry Kissinger.

He died there from a shotgun blast to the head. According to Fauquier County Deputy Sheriff Luther Cox, it was suicide.

Carol Felsenthal dismisses the lingering doubts about Phil’s death with one line: “None of his friends doubted that Phil Graham, age 48, had planned to commit suicide.” However, in 1986, Luther Cox told investigators, “I will say nothing about this case until given a release by Mrs. Graham.” The Fauquier County sheriff’s department claimed to have lost all records of the case. Both the death certificate and the medical examiner’s report were being kept secret by local and state authorities, by agreement with Kay Graham.

And so, by fair means or foul, Kay Graham gained control of the *Washington Post*, an instrument of such potent political power that, it is fair to say, the history of the last 30 years would have been quite different, were Phil Graham still alive. Carol Felsenthal does not trouble herself with these larger questions, however. She has devoted her considerable energy to creating an “intimate” portrait of the “personalities” involved, to the exclusion of any real analysis of their respective roles in history. Any “aristocracy” worth its salt learns to subordinate personal concerns to its overriding political objectives, and Kay Graham’s circle is no exception. However, it is useful to provide the plebeians with an endearing, or even not-so-endearing, “personal” image of the folks in charge, lest the *hoi polloi* develop too strong an interest in those larger questions.