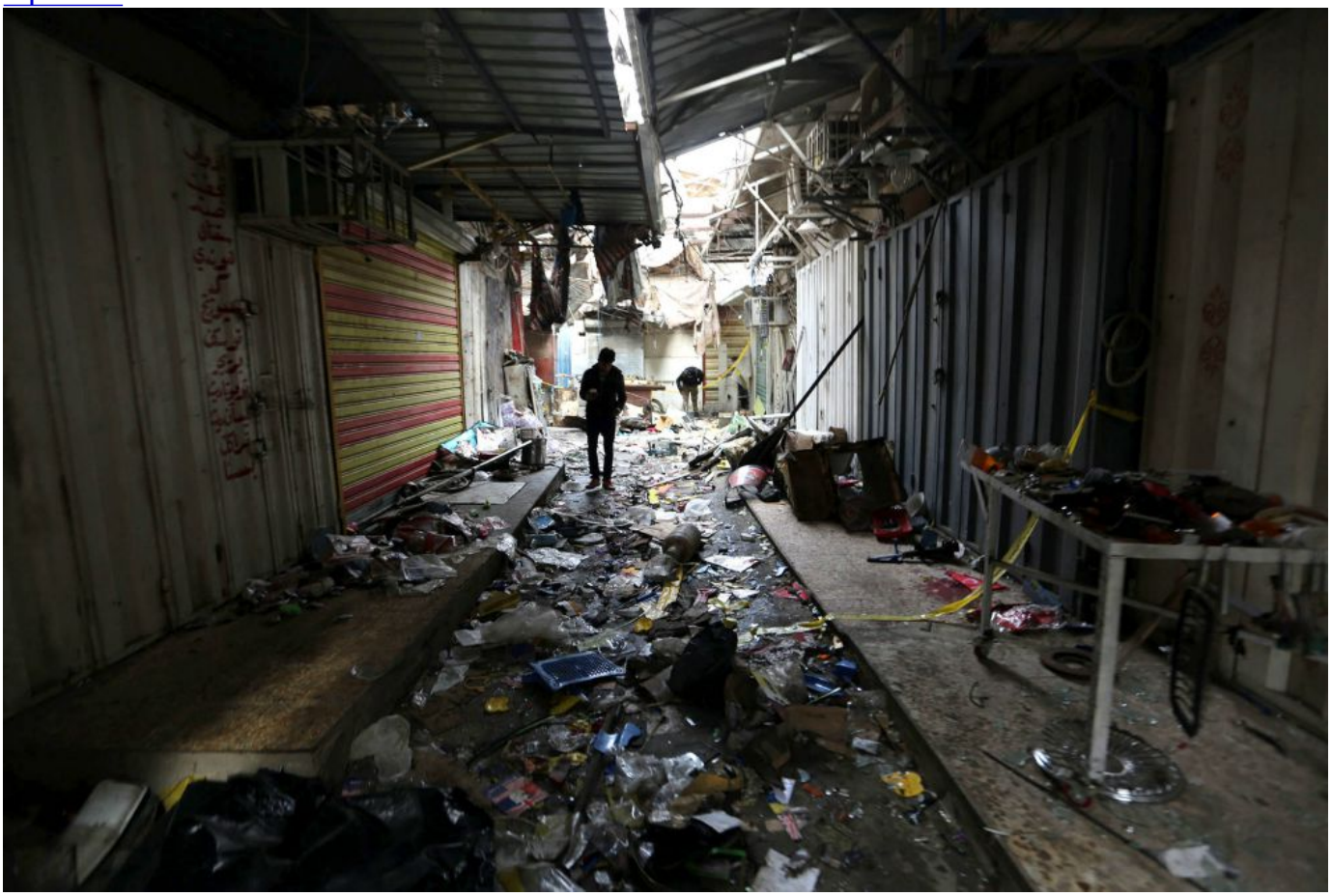
Opinion



A person inspects the site of a bomb attack in Baghdad, Iraq, Dec. 31, 2017. (CNS/EPA/Ali Abbas)



by Colman McCarthy

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Multiple encomiums have been lavished on "The Post," the Steven Spielberg film about The Washington Post publisher Katharine Graham and her brave grit in 1971 to print secret government documents about the Vietnam War — what became known as the Pentagon Papers. In glistening praise, The New Yorker hailed the work as "a solidly rousing act of historical re-creation." Time magazine: "There is no more galvanizing, or more important, film this year."

When I find time, and trusting that the reviewers have it right, I'll likely get to a movie theater. Until then, I'll be jostling my memory for the 27 years I was privileged and grateful to be a part of The Post, from 1969 to 1997. It was a writer's newspaper, which meant from my base on the editorial page, I could shop my prose to all sections of the paper — from sport page froth to regular op-ed columns to obituaries.

As with all corporations, and each of us as individuals, The Washington Post was and is a mix of favorables and failings.

Favorables first. 1969 was also Katharine Graham's first year at the paper as publisher and CEO. The daughter of a wealthy Jewish businessman who bought the paper in 1933 at a bankruptcy auction for $825,000 and a Lutheran mother devoted to her husband and children, Katharine Graham was burdened with insecurities.

"I seemed to be carrying inadequacy as baggage," she wrote in her 642-page 1997 autobiography *Personal History*, confessing to "vast problems with self-confidence." Journalism aside, "I had no business experience, no management experience and little knowledge of the governmental, political or other matters we dealt with." Knowing how much she didn't know, she aligned herself with people who did. In the newsroom, the standout was the dashing Ben Bradlee and his wariness of Washington's political supremos. As the paper's legendary editor who oversaw reporting of the Watergate scandal in the mid-1970s that led to the deposing of President Richard Nixon, his tenure ran from 1968 to 1991.

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The other thoroughbred was Philip Geyelin, the editorial page editor whose political leanings were on the thoughtful, not the noisy, left. I was one of his first hires, and I came to love him for both his kindness in bringing me to the paper on the strength mostly of free-lance pieces I'd been writing for three years at National Catholic Reporter and magazines like The New Republic and The Atlantic. Geyelin set me free, first to write about an ever-widening band of disturbers of the peace ranging from the Berrigans to Dick Gregory and, second, to focus on solutions to problems. He believed American journalism was overly stacked with problem-describers and too few solution-finders.

Among the others Katharine Graham invited into both her life and newspaper was Warren Buffet, the investment grandee who, she said, brought "a whole new phase in my life." When The Post went public in 1973, Buffet quickly bought in, heavily. The sage of Omaha, who as 14-year-old paper boy in the nation's capital had risen before dawn to deliver about 400 copies of The Washington Post, envisioned huge payoffs for himself and other shareholders. It's doubtful he and they imagined how huge. Starting at $26 a share, in time the stock would soon quadruple in value.

In my occasional conversations with Katharine Graham, whether in her home in Georgetown or the many times she came to the editorial board's morning meetings, I was touched by her gracious and self-effacing ways. I was well on the far outer fringes of her A-list circle of friends, which included Henry Kissinger and Robert McNamara. Another was Nancy Reagan, a regular lunch partner in Washington and a sometime visitor to the Graham estate in Martha's Vineyard.

In 1982 as the first lady, Reagan wrote *To Love a Child*, a book about the Foster Grandparents program started by Sargent Shriver under the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act. It matched elderly volunteers to be mentors to needy children. In my review of the book for the Post, I found it had zero literary value. Page after stifling page revealed "a double-depressant of numbing cliché-ridden prose that ranges from Lady Bountiful pitter-patter to tea room philosophizing." My panning prompted a call to Mrs. Graham by an ego-wounded Nancy Reagan, wondering how the paper could have assigned the book to such a liberal attack dog. The publisher, apparently sympathetic, asked a newsroom editor to see who was responsible for the error of assigning the book to me. The decision was traced to the book review editor who, to her credit, didn't back down — knowing that I had once worked for Sargent Shriver and had visited more than a few Foster Grandparents centers and

knew the program well. So informed, Katherine Graham moved on to other urgencies and never spoke to me about the review.

Now the failings. The Post was an early and ardent editorial booster of the American invasion of Vietnam in the mid-1960s that would lead to more than two million deaths and a military defeat. Believing the upbeat scenarios of a sure-thing victory, the paper said highmindedly: "We are in South Vietnam to preserve the right of a small people to govern themselves and make their own choices." Throughout the five years of Lyndon Johnson's war, the hawkish and emulating Post stood with him. The paper's pro-war fever peaked in April 1967 when Martin Luther King Jr. called the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and was "on the wrong side of a world revolution." For those double truths, The Post hammered King, saying he " has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country, his people."

The militaristic paper was hardly alone in its support of killing. In 1968, The Boston Globe reported that 39 of the country's largest newspapers editorialized in favor of staying the course and against withdrawal.

1969, one of the bloodiest years in the war, saw a rare turnabout in opinionating for a major American newspaper: The Post moved from pro-war to anti-war, with Philip Geyelin earning a Pulitzer Prize for his editorials in 1970. A Yale graduate, he was a Marine 1st lieutenant in World War II and saw combat in Iwo Jima where, he would recall, the bodies of his slain comrades were "stacked up like cordwood." He called war "a ghastly business."

Feb. 5, 2003, found Secretary of State Colin Powell, hailed by much of the establishment media as Mr. Integrity, at the United Nation whooping for war by declaring absolutely that Saddam Hussein's Iraq had weapons of mass destruction — saying we should nail him before he uses them on us. Next day, The Washington Post was enthusiastically buying in. Its editorial's opening line happily hummed that "it is hard to imagine how anyone could doubt" Powell's evidence. It was "overwhelming." More, the editorial agreed with gung-ho Sen. Joseph Biden: The evidence for action was "powerful and irrefutable."

It wasn't long before Powell's speech was seen as blather. No weapons were found. Years later he lamented, "I regret it. I will always regret it. It was a terrible mistake."

Estimates vary on the number of Iraqis killed or injured — 250,000, 500,000, more than a million — by an American military sent to war 15 years ago by George W.

Bush and Congress. Neither them nor The Washington Post has ever apologized or called for reparations for the unspeakable violence inflicted on so many for so long — and no end in sight today.

As Spielberg and his film continue to do well at the box office and "The Post" has an Oscar nomination for best picture, perhaps he might consider trying a follow up: a documentary on the American corporate media and its penchants for war. It would be a low-budget work, what with much of the research already done. Start with the books: *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death* by Norman Solomon, David Swanson's *War Is a Lie* and *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* from Chris Hedges. Each writer has a flint-sharp mind, each has a conscience not to be stilled by peace-through-strength guff, and each isn't going away anytime soon.

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