

A Star in the Making

Examining the History and Significance
of the *Washington Evening Star*,
an Influential American Newspaper



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Introduction

In the top tier of great American newspapers, only one has the rare combination of qualities possessed by the *Washington Evening Star* (1852-1981):

- **Dependable:**
The *Star* was the acknowledged “paper of record” in our nation’s capital for over a century
- **Objective:**
The *Star* was not allied to any political party—a rarity among the city’s papers
- **National in scope:**
The *Star* covered all US regions during eras when many big city dailies did not
- **Local in depth:**
The *Star*’s coverage of individual government departments was greater than most papers’ coverage of the entire government
- **Groundbreaking:**
In 1897 the “White House Press Corps” had a single member, a reporter from the *Star*
- **Farsighted:**
Almost alone, the *Star* began covering and supporting African-American civil rights leaders before 1920
- **Huge:**
By 1923 the *Star*’s massive 70-page issues were a world record for a daily newspaper
- **Rich:**
By the 1930s the *Star* led the nation in advertising revenue
- **Powerful:**
By World War II, the *Star*’s reporters had unprecedented access to governmental and military sources, and it showed
- **Excellent:**
The *Star*’s editors and reporters won 11 Pulitzers and almost every other award for journalism

This combination of qualities has made the *Washington Evening Star* a much-sought-after research tool today. James Danky, former curator of the third-largest archive of American newspapers—The Wisconsin Historical Society—describes the *Star* as “the most referenced source for historians, from before the Civil War through the era of the Civil Rights Movement.”

Two contemporary, award-winning historians who have used the *Star* extensively describe the research value of the paper:

Donald Ritchie, author of *Reporting from Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps*, writes:

“I devoted a chapter...to the Washington, D.C. newspapers, and my research showed that until the 1950s the *Star* was the most thorough paper in Washington. It had the largest reporting staff in the city for many years, and being an afternoon paper it reported the day’s news more promptly, which accounted for its large readership. The paper was too late in its efforts to transform itself into a morning paper, and went out of existence in 1981. But for the years between 1851 and 1981 it is a treasure trove of inside politics and government reporting.”

David Greenberg, Professor of History, Journalism & Media Studies at Rutgers University and author of *Nixon’s Shadow*, writes:

“It was indeed the premier paper in the nation’s capital for many years; not until the 1960s or even early 1970s did the *Washington Post* ‘overtake’ it. It was home to many great reporters and columnists and delivered reporting on national affairs and politics that was at times as influential as that of the *New York Times*. Even in its last years it was an important and serious paper where future journalism stars such as Howie Kurtz, Fred Barnes and Maureen Dowd cut their teeth. It occupies an important place in not only the history of American journalism but in the history of America.”

Great from the Start

The *Star* has been receiving accolades for more than ten decades, including these from other publications that attest to its value from the beginning:

In 1879, John Brisben Walker wrote in *The Republic: A Journal of Politics and Society*:

“In the first place, the *Star* is read by everybody in Washington, and a public man would no more think of failing to glance over its columns in the evening than he would think of doing without his dinner...He must go to the *Star*. And he does, whether he be the President of the United States, the secretary of a department, or simply a visitor to the capital.”

In 1918, the editors of the African-American newspaper *The Washington Bee* wrote:

“The *Evening Star* is one of the few really great newspapers of our day, regardless of locality. It is well equipped in all the usual essentials, but its greatest asset is its character...The *Star* has made a **notable record of fairness** to the colored race and there have been instances where it has waived the rule of proportion to help our race as a whole or some individual member of it. The colored people are grateful for such treatment, and their gratitude takes the practical form of reciprocity. In another column we reproduce a recent editorial of the *Star* entitled, ‘The Colored Man and Loyalty.’ It speaks for itself.”

In 1927, the editors of the *Washington Post* wrote:

“The *Washington Star* yesterday rounded out the seventy-fifth year of its life. In the face of this example of journalistic longevity, marked as it is by green and vigorous growth, the *Washington Post* begins to wonder whether it was not mistaken when it cites its own fiftieth anniversary as a remarkable event. The *Star* saw so much before the *Post* was born, and could a tale unfold of such surpassing interest, that the public will not be satisfied until it hears the full story. The years from 1852 to 1877, crowded with fate and unrolling a pageant of mighty figures in mighty affairs, all passed under the watchful eye of the *Evening Star*. As a youngster the *Post* is anxious to read the *Star*’s own account, from its own files, of those stirring days in Washington. ...The *Evening Star* is prosperous because it earns and deserves prosperity. **It is a credit to the National Capital in its enterprise, its wholesomeness, its public spirit and its loyalty to Washington.** The *Post* joins the people of Washington and the country in hearty good wishes to the *Evening Star* at the beginning of its seventy-sixth year.”

The Spoils of Independence

Today, all media claim to be independent and objective, but this was not the case when the *Star* began in 1852. The “dark ages of partisan journalism”—as defined in F.L. Mott’s *American Journalism*—lasted from 1801 to 1860, a period in which virtually all of the major newspapers in America were openly allied with political parties. The *Star* was not alone in bucking this trend, but it was alone in Washington, where politics permeated everything.

On December 16, 1852, the first issue of the *Star* set forth the mission of the paper:

“The *Star* is designed to supply a desideratum which has long existed at the Metropolis of the nation. Free from party trammels and sectarian influences, it will preserve a strict neutrality...The *Star* will also beam forth intelligence from all sections of the country, by telegraph and mail, and give it in a form so condensed as not to render it necessary to sift a bushel of chaff before finding a grain of wheat... It is the determination of the publisher to make it a paper which will be a welcome visitor to every family, and one which may be perused not only with pleasure, but with profit.”

The profit, it turned out, was to be shared by the readers and the publisher alike, and that is the real key to the research value of the *Star*. By presenting the views of all parties—and there were many more than two of them back then—the *Star* vastly increased its readership and revenue. This happened so fast that when the Civil War came, the *Star* was able to cover it with resources that few papers could match. Today, the *Star* remains one of the only places where researchers can find direct, on-the-front reports from the battlefields of the Civil War. And it is the only place where they can find detailed daily articles on the fierce debates in all quarters of Washington over slavery, emancipation, and Lincoln’s ever-shifting political and military strategy.

The *Star* came out of the Civil War with even greater wealth, respect, and influence. Its articles and editorials were reprinted in newspapers across America and in the capitals of Europe. A search of American newspapers shows more than 5,900 articles reprinted from the *Star*; the *Times* of London subsequently reprinted more than 300 of them.

The Twentieth Century

In the decades that followed, the *Star*'s owner and editor, Crosby Noyes and his sons—one of whom served also as president of the Associated Press—expanded the all-inclusive vision of the paper from political parties to ethnic minorities. Today, the *Star* is often referred to as the more conservative counterpart to the liberal-leaning *Washington Post*, but that does not do justice to the *Star*'s editorial heritage. Throughout its history, the *Star* stood first for telling all sides of all stories, and second, for putting forward a moral argument when necessary.

Noyes made this clear in an editorial he published on May 10, 1885:

“The *Star* is independent, not neutral. Neutrality implies being undecided. No one who reads the *Star* can really fancy that it is in our nature to fail to have an emphatic opinion upon every subject worth having an opinion about.”

One opinion Noyes had was about race, prejudice, and justice. From 1918 to 1919 the *Star* published more than 450 articles supporting the African-American community, especially in Washington but also across the country. Its coverage of the 1919 race riots in the District of Columbia differs remarkably from the inflammatory reporting of most other papers at the time. Here again, the *Star*'s stance not only supported the interests of the minorities in Washington—where the African-American community was significant—it also filled the coffers of the paper.

Over the next few decades, while the country reeled and recovered from the Great Depression, the *Star* prospered as never before. By the end of the 1930s, its advertising revenue exceeded that of the greatest dailies in New York and Chicago, despite the much larger populations of those cities. The reason for this success was the *Star*'s unparalleled coverage of politics in Washington.

When the *Star* was founded, the population of Washington was 51,000; in 1900 it was 278,000; by 1950 it was 802,000, fueled by the increased scale of the federal government and by newly arrived legions of interest groups, industries, and lobbyists. Washington was transformed from a sleepy Southern city to a bustling nerve center. Political issues grew too, from seemingly simple, principled positions to complex compromises of confusing origin. How to explain it all to the nation?

In the twentieth century, that explanatory role became the central goal of the *Star*, whose massive afternoon editions peered into every nook and cranny, from the smallest committee meetings to the loftiest Executive decrees. To these in-depth reports on the machinery of government, the *Star* added lengthy investigative pieces, editorial-

page commentaries, profiles of political figures from across the nation, and, famously, political cartoons that compressed the nation's hopes and concerns into a single telling image.

The Evening Star.

WASHINGTON, D. C. SATURDAY, APRIL 7, 1917—EIGHTEEN PAGES—

WEATHER
Fair, calm, cool, tonight and to-morrow; slightly warmer to-morrow night; probably frost to-morrow night. High 51, low 37. Wind light S.W. at 7 a.m. but freshens to S.W. at 10 a.m. Full report on page 1.

**"From Press to Home
Within the Hour"**

SECOND DAY OF THE WAR FINDS ALL U. S. AGENCIES BUSY WITH BATTLE PLANS

Mobilization of Armed Forces and Industry Is Well Advanced, and Conservation of Food Supply Has Been Undertaken.

DECISION HAS ABOUT BEEN REACHED TO TAKE OVER INTERNED VESSELS

Committees of Congress Consider Questions of Finance and Methods of Raising an Army—Steel Men Make Concession Which Will Save \$15,000,000.

The second day of war with Germany found every government agency in action along predetermined lines, with congressional committees at work on the new army bill and finance measures.

The first touch of real warfare between the United States and Germany occurred last night, when naval officers attempted to take possession of the German auxiliary cruiser *Cormoran* in the harbor of Agaña, Island of Guam. The Germans rather than have the cruiser fall into the hands of the Americans blew her up, killing two of her German crew. Five others are missing and probably dead.

German raiders were reported off the coast at Nantuxet and the Virginia capes.

Mails to Germany suspended.

Postmaster General Burleson today announced the suspension of mail service to Germany and her allies. Postal money orders were also suspended.

The navy and its newly organized fleet were last night reported to have taken possession of the German auxiliary cruiser *Cormoran* in the harbor of Agaña, Island of Guam.

It is probable, however, that with the capture of *Cormoran* today, here and the intention of the American navy in the event of capture, the vessel will be taken to the United States.

GERMANS DESTROY INTERNED GUNBOAT IN HARBOR AT GUAM

The *Cormoran* Blown Up by Crew When U. S. Forces Arrive to Take Possession.

TWO WARRANT OFFICERS AND FIVE SEAMAN KILLED

Twenty Officers, Twelve Warrant Officers and 281 Enlisted Men Are Held Prisoners.

The interned German gunboat *Cormoran* at Guam has been blown up.

The destruction of the *Cormoran* took place at 8 o'clock last night, Washington time.

The *Cormoran* refused to surrender to the American forces which went to take possession of her and was destroyed by her crew. Two German warrant officers and five enlisted men of the crew were killed in the explosion. Twenty officers, twelve warrant officers and 281 enlisted men were taken prisoners.

Many Department Notices.

The message was received at the Navy Department at 8 o'clock today, Capt. Roy Smith, governor of Guam, had communicated of the vessel's capture.

Intention of the Germans at Guam has been the capture of certain vessels and the transportation of the crew and passengers to the island of Guam.

The several companies of German *Landwehr* Brigade reported by the State Department on behalf of the *Cormoran*'s officers, had crew to have the vessel transported to San Francisco.



NO DIFFERENCES NOW.

CASH FOR UPKEEP OF REGULAR ARMY

Measure Carrying \$278,000,000 Is Reported by Senate Military Committee.

TWO BILLIONS MAY BE LENT TO ALLIES

Secretary Maddox Discusses Plans With House and Senate Committee Members.

MONEY TO BE SPENT IN U. S.

Plans for fighting the war were discussed.

SEE SHORT CROP IN WINTER WHEAT

U. S. Officials Estimate It Will Be 50,000,000 Bushels Less.

A prospective shortage of more than 50,000,000 bushels in the winter wheat crop, as compared with last year's crop, is the first war-feeding problem.

GERMAN RAIDERS REPORTED LURKING ALONG THE COAST

One Alarm Comes From Newport, R. I.; Another From the Virginia Capes.

ALL SHIPPING WARNED TO REMAIN IN PORT

Destroyer Fleet at Sea and Assumed to Be in Search of the Enemy Vessels.

Reports of German commerce raiders off Atlantic ports were flushed along the southeast today and all shipping practically was tied up, while naval patrols went out to establish the identity of mysterious ships reported near the lines.

It was the first breath of war at the doors of America, and it sent a thrill through the country.

Reported off Nantuxet.

The first report came from Nantuxet, Va., where a German raider was seen at 1:30 a.m. which was being and possibly reported it to the Navy Department.

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AUSTRIANS BREAK WITH U. S. IS REPORT RECEIVED IN LONDON

Same Source Expects That Bulgaria and Turkey Will Do Likewise.

REPRESENTATIVES HERE HAVE RECEIVED NO WORD

Cablegram Get That Balkan Will Look After Interests of America in Vienna.

By the Associated Press.

LONDON, April 7, 6:45 p.m.—Passports have been placed at the disposal of the American embassy in Vienna, according to a dispatch to the Exchange Telegraph Company from The Hague, quoting telegrams received there from the Austrian capital.

The dispatch says that Bulgaria and Turkey have also decided to break off relations with the United States and that Holland will probably look after American interests in Washington and American interests in Vienna.

Mr. Wood received in Washington, Word that the Austro-Hungarian foreign office had placed passports at the disposal of the American embassy at Vienna had not reached the American embassy here early today, according to the Associated Press.

Austrian passport of Bulgaria and Turkey had been placed at the disposal of the American embassy in Vienna, according to a dispatch to the Exchange Telegraph Company from The Hague, quoting telegrams received there from the Austrian capital.

The political cartoons of the *Star* often appeared on the front page, just under the masthead, and they became as influential as the paper's reporting. Starting in 1900, the *Star*'s chief cartoonist was Clifford Berryman, whose work rose to iconic status, prompting President Truman to tell him in 1949: "You are ageless and timeless. Presidents, senators, and even Supreme Court justices come and go, but the Monument and Berryman stand." In later years, Berryman's successors at the *Star* included many other gifted cartoonists, including Richard Mansfield and Pat Oliphant.

The *Star* had always been tenacious, but as its expertise, reach, and influence grew it became both tenacious and feared—a combination that gave it unparalleled access to sources inside the government, the military, and the industries that served them.

When World War II approached, the *Star* used this access to publish "must-read" accounts of the intense, inside-the-beltway debates surrounding America's entrance into the conflict. When the War came, finding many of its best reporters drafted into the service, the paper extended its "all-inclusive" tradition to the hiring of women reporters. One of these, Mary McGrory, soon rose to prominence for her coverage of the McCarthy hearings in 1954, and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 for her commentary on the Watergate scandal.

A Great Paper to the End

In the decades following World War II, the *Star's* coverage of the Civil Rights Movement, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society legislation, and the Vietnam War maintained and even increased the paper's national reputation. The *Star* had been an afternoon paper since its founding, however, and by the late 1950s it began to lose ground to its morning edition rival, the *Washington Post*. The *Star* fought back by adopting an increasingly conservative editorial position to counter the more liberal stance of the *Post*. More importantly, the *Star* upped its own already high level of reporting: It won Pulitzer Prizes in 1958, 1959, 1960, 1966, 1974, 1975, 1979, and 1981.

Notable among those Pulitzers was that of Haynes Johnson, for his coverage of the Civil Rights movement, and that of James Polk, for his pre-Watergate exposé of alleged irregularities in President Nixon's 1972 campaign financing.

By the 1970s, almost all big-city afternoon dailies were in trouble or already gone. The *Star* was one of the last to succumb to the combined pressures of television news and new commuter habits. In 1978, Time, Inc. purchased the *Star*. It seemed like a natural fit for Time, whose flagship magazine was archrival to *Newsweek*, which was owned by the *Washington Post*. The idea was to go head to head on both media fronts, but Time underestimated the investment and creativity it took to cover Washington as the *Star* had done for over a century. When it realized this, the company closed the *Star* on August 7, 1981.

The *Star* was a great paper to the end. Among the writers who worked there in 1981: Maureen Dowd (later at the *New York Times*), Mary McGrory (later at the *Washington Post*), Michael Isikoff (later at *Newsweek*), Jules Witcover (later at the *Baltimore Sun*), Howard Kurtz (later at the *Washington Post*), Fred Barnes (later at the *Weekly Standard*), Stephen Aug (later at ABC News), Fred Hiatt (later at the *Washington Post*), Jane Mayer (later at *The New Yorker*), Chris Hanson (later at *Columbia Journalism Review*), Jeremiah O'Leary (later at the *Washington Times*), and Jack Germond (later at the *Baltimore Sun*).

Today, partial runs of original issues of the *Star* are held by several academic libraries and historical societies, but the most complete archive of the *Star's* back-file is owned by the *Washington Post*, which purchased the *Star's* equipment, buildings, and archives in bankruptcy court. In partnership with the *Post*, Readex used this archive to bring the *Washington Evening Star* back to life for today's and tomorrow's scholars.

Appendix: The Star's Pulitzer Prize Winners

1944: Clifford K. Berryman, Editorial Cartooning, for “Where Is the Boat Going?”

1950: James T. Berryman, Editorial Cartooning, for “All Set for a Super-Secret Session in Washington.”

1958: George Beveridge, Local Reporting, for “Metro, City of Tomorrow.”

1959: Mary Lu Werner [Forbes], Local Reporting, “For her comprehensive year-long coverage of the (school) integration crisis.”

1960: Miriam Ottenberg, Local Reporting, “For a series of seven articles exposing a used-car racket in Washington, D.C., that victimized many unwary buyers.”

1966: Haynes Johnson, National Reporting, “For his distinguished coverage of the civil rights conflict centered about Selma, Alabama, and particularly his reporting of its aftermath.”

1974: James R. Polk, National Reporting, for his disclosure of alleged irregularities in the financing of the campaign to re-elect President Nixon in 1972.

1975: Mary McGrory, Commentary, for her commentary on public affairs during 1974.

1979: Edwin M. Yoder Jr., Editorial Writing.

1981: Jonathan Yardley, Criticism, for book reviews.

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