



Reviews



I. F. Stone: The Journalist as Pamphleteer

by Sol Stern

C I. F. STONE celebrated two birthdays on January 19, 1968—the 15th of his newsweekly, and his own 60th. There were no bouquets from the National Press Club, nor was he honored by one of those perfunctory testimonial dinners which leftish organizations are forever tendering, in a profound mood of despair, to those who have served the cause well. Appropriately, I. F. Stone celebrated with 1200 of his readers in New York's Town Hall, which he rented for the occasion, and he ran the whole show himself.

Stone's weekly has been a striking experiment in journalistic freedom in an age which has witnessed the emergence of journalism as big business. The "important" national columnists and commentators—the Restons, Severeids and others—have made it less because of their contributions to public enlightenment than because of the powerful institutions for which they work. One cannot imagine any of them, even including Walter Lippman, successfully marketing on a home-fashioned basis their own observations on the Washington scene; one cannot imagine them functioning successfully as journalists without their privileged communications with the seats of power, granted to them mainly because of the influence of the corporate structures for which they work. The price they pay for such power, of course, is imprisonment in the system which it is presumably their professional duty to scrutinize carefully and critically. The big national media, forever ballyhooing the freedoms bestowed by the American system, are in effect that system's own refutation.

Ironically enough, it is I. F. Stone, rather than his more "influential" col-

leagues, who has proved the virtues of a truly free journalistic marketplace. Working anachronistically as a 19th century entrepreneur, he is one of our few free men. A decade before the new radicals began to talk of the notion, Stone began one of America's most important "counter-institutions," his own newsweekly, now almost an institution in itself in the publishing world.

When Stone's first issue went out to the readers in 1953, its prospects seemed as bleak as the times. General Eisenhower was about to be inaugurated for his first term; Joseph McCarthy had just been appointed to head a Senate investigating committee; American and communist troops were still fighting a bloody stalemate along the 38th parallel in Korea. From Death Row, Sing Sing, the Rosenbergs were appealing to the new President for clemency.

The American left was in its most profound state of disarray since the Palmer raids of the early '20s. Not the least of the casualties was the New York Compass, the second of two short-lived successors to P.M., the newspaper where Stone had first made his reputation as a Washington correspondent.

When the Compass folded, Stone had few options. As a journalist, he had pretty much burned his bridges to respectability behind him when he publicly supported Henry Wallace in 1948, at a time when many of his old liberal colleagues such as Max Lerner and James Weschler were already enthusiastically embracing the Cold War. Stone had become anything but an "insider." A journalistic pariah without a newspaper to work for, he wasn't even a good credit risk. Perhaps if he had trimmed his sails a bit, he could have returned to work for

the New York Post, where he had started as an editorial writer in the '30s. But "Izzy" had been spoiled, having always enjoyed the good fortune of writing for publishers who let him have his say.

So it was partly necessity, partly inspiration, that led him to try to make it on his own by selling his reporting through the mails. The major problem was finding the several thousand people who might, in that time of fear, be willing to sustain a radical newsweekly to be delivered to them through the mails at a cost of \$5.00 per year. It was, Stone now recalls, "like looking for a needle in a haystack." Luckily, he was able to use the subscription lists of the defunct Compass, where he had gained a considerable personal following, as well as those of a number of other organizations with select radical memberships. It also helped that he had \$3500 in the bank—his severance pay from the Compass.

By January 1953, Stone had rounded up 5000 paid subscribers—not a lot, but enough to keep alive during the first tough years. And unspectacularly, without promotional campaigns or publicity, the subscriber list began to grow. Within a short time, Stone had paid off the loans that helped him get started, and he stood unencumbered, the successful bourgeois owner of a tidy little business. The weekly's growth, steady during the '50s, began to accelerate during the '60s. In the last few years, the circulation has almost tripled to its current 38,000. The weekly now grosses over \$100,000 per year. Since the costs of the enterprise—other than mail rates and printing—have remained relatively fixed, Mr. Stone's venture is turning a neat profit.

Now, with the hardcover publication of his second collection of essays from

the weekly, there will be the usual encomiums from the reviewers. Stone will be labeled a "modern Tom Paine," "our last independent journalist," "a gadfly to the Establishment." He will be praised for his irreverence in the same way that during the McCarthy period he was generally dismissed as a partisan of "the other side." It is now clearly fashionable to give Stone his due. Of this turnabout he notes wryly, "It looks like I have graduated from a pariah to a character."

The new book, *In a Time of Torment* (Random House, 463 pp.), is a collection of important, frightening and exhilarating pieces, having all the virtues one has come to associate with Stone's special brand of journalism. But it is a little difficult to define exactly what makes Stone's writing so special. Precise and always clear, it lacks eloquence; and radical ideologists will look in vain for a grand theoretical insight into the nature of American imperialism. Murray Kempton is right when he says in his kindly introduction to the volume, "The argument could be made that the average issue of I.F. Stone's Weekly is more illuminating than the average Sunday edition of the New York Times." If his weekly is more useful than the Sunday Times, it is because Stone himself acts as a guide to the Times which, without him, remains an inert mass of fact. This is Stone's great strength. The Washington press corps is virtually unable to distinguish the important from the trivial, although they are the ones who create our sense of political reality. But it is Stone, pouring through the clippings, reports, congressional hearings and official briefings, who provides the interpretation and the corrective. Stone's weekly might be read as a primer for working Washington journalists, telling them where they went wrong each week.

A case in point is a recent issue of the weekly stimulated by a widely headlined story that the U.S. had moderated its position on negotiations with the National Liberation Front in Vietnam. The origin of the story was a statement by Ambassador Goldberg, testifying in congressional hearings that the U.S. was willing to have the NLF invited to participate in a U.N. Security Council discussion of Vietnam. This was reported by the press as a new concession by the U.S. The story made Stone suspicious and he started digging into the transcripts of the entire hearing. What

he discovered was that the U.S. position had actually *hardened* on the question of dealing with the NLF. Stone was able to show that Goldberg's statement of U.S. willingness to have the NLF come to the Security Council was meaningless, since later questioning of Goldberg in the hearings made it clear that his statement could only be understood in the context of President Johnson's earlier and only official statement, which put the matter this way: "The Viet Cong would have no difficulty in being represented and having their views presented if Hanoi for a moment decides to cease their aggression." Thus the U.S. had still not explicitly stated its willingness to negotiate directly with the NLF.

This type of analysis does not make the headlines, but it is an essential corrective to the stories which unfortunately do make the headlines.

There are no oracular insights needed to do that job, Mr. Stone will tell you. He has few if any inside sources in the government, and no one leaks him information. He goes to no dinner parties at the White House or State Department. He rarely even attends press conferences. His principal tools are the published record and the telephone.

WHEN MR. STONE first started the weekly he got himself an office in downtown Washington. But he soon realized that no one phoned him there with "hot" stories, and he moved back to his small, unpretentious brick frame house in the northwest section of Washington. He works there out of a converted upstairs bedroom and a basement that houses old newspapers and his own bulky clipping file. The walls of his "office" are lined with a few standard reference sources such as Facts on File, U.S. Reports and Keesings Archives Ltd., and a modest library of books on the subjects he most often covers in the weekly. It is also out of Stone's little house that his wife Esther has taken care of the entire business end of the weekly for all of its 15 years.

Mr. Stone's working day begins with the six a.m. delivery of his morning papers—the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post and the Baltimore Sun. With their arrival, he begins the search for the story that might be given a treatment in the next issue. If he sees something that strikes his curiosity he may follow it up by making

a few phone calls to an appropriate government agency or a friend on Capitol Hill. Perhaps he will go down to Capitol Hill to look at some recent transcripts of testimony before a congressional committee. In the afternoon, he usually drops in on his favorite magazine stand to pick up the British and French press. All very mundane, but it is a routine that inevitably turns up something useful and otherwise neglected.

His reputation notwithstanding, Stone is not a "radical" in the conventional sense of the word. He does indeed talk of the injustices and public hypocrisies that have beset this country during his Washington tenure, but more in tones of sadness than of anger. Politically, he is an eternal optimist, forever hoping that the system, for all its imperfections, may yet deliver on its promises of a good society. Almost ritualistically, with each new presidential inauguration, Stone comments about some omen of change for the better in the upcoming administration. He saw the early Eisenhower as a man of peace who should be given a chance; and although he did not support Kennedy in 1960, he did see his inauguration as a sign of hope for fresh new alternatives to what had become traditional Cold War policies. In the first issue of the weekly after Kennedy's assassination, he wrote a devastating recapitulation of the new President's past political career, yet was still able to end the essay by saying, "There may be surprises in Johnson and we wish the President luck. The manner and energy of his debut stir hope."

Stone has an almost calculated naïveté about the regenerative powers of American institutions. It is this, more than anything else in his attitudes, that can give his criticism such a corrosive effect. For when Stone makes his case against American policies which have proved to be wantonly inhumane, it comes out not as another shrill polemic, but as a carefully documented record of shattered hopes and promises.

FROM THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC to Malcolm X, there is almost no issue into which Stone has not thrown himself in the last few years. His most recent fight is perhaps best prefaced by a story he likes to tell about himself. During the summer of last year, while convalescing from an illness that forced him to suspend the publication of the

weekly for a few months, Stone received thousands of get-well messages and letters from his readers. One of them was from a rabbi in Cleveland who wrote that he had been a long-time reader and admirer of Izzy's and that he hoped he would soon be well so that he could resume publication of the weekly. The rabbi ended his letter by saying, "I pray that like Moses you should live to be 120 years." Izzy wrote back to the rabbi: "I don't know about living to 120, but I am already in trouble with the Jews."

There is perhaps no living American reporter who was as intimately and emotionally involved with the creation and struggle for a Jewish state as Stone. He was working in Palestine when the armed struggle against the British began in 1945. One year later he traveled the Jewish underground through the D.P. camps of Europe and spent eight days on a boat illegally in the Mediterranean with hundreds of Jewish survivors of Hitler's concentration camps, running the British blockade into Palestine. His book about that experience was translated into Hebrew and was used by the Israeli Army for troop indoctrination during the war for independence. In 1947, Stone celebrated Passover in a British detention camp on Cyprus. In 1948, he was back in Israel covering the Arab-Israeli war and out of that experience came another sympathetic book. Since then he has made five reportorial trips to Israel. His writings have always supported the efforts of Israel to create a viable Jewish state.

But if Stone, with Nazi Germany indelibly stamped on his mind, was an ardent Jewish nationalist, he also distrusted the extreme Zionist position. After the six-day war, in a long review in the *New York Review of Books*, in an essay in *RAMPARTS* and in several issues of his own publication, Stone warned of the dangers to Israel of an all too easy lapse into a posture of militarism and chauvinism toward the Arabs. He argued that Israel must begin, even unilaterally, to make greater efforts at reconciliation with the Arabs. To move in that direction, the Israelis had to come to an understanding that the roots of Arab hostility to the state of Israel lay in real and not in imagined wrongs committed against them.

There was no rancor in Stone's articles. They were no more "pro-Arab" or less "pro-Israel" than anything he

had ever written. Indeed, Stone agreed that Israel was forced into preemptive action in the six-day war and that it was unrealistic to expect her to give up the conquered territories short of a negotiated peace with guarantees from the Arabs. What he thought crucial, however, was the Israeli treatment of the Arabs in the occupied territories and the kinds of imaginative plans to be developed for future cooperation and for settlement of the Arab refugees. Ultimately, he argued that the conflict in the Middle East was not a simple David and Goliath story but a historical tragedy—a conflict of two competing nationalisms based on real needs and fed on real injustices.

If the argument seemed directed more toward Israel and Zionism, it was because Stone knew that his readers' sympathies lay in that area and that was where they had to be educated. And if, as some of his critics later charged, there was a big change between what Stone said in 1948 about the state of Israel and what he said in 1967, it could be understood as the difference between a country that stood in physical danger of being stillborn and a country which stood in spiritual danger of falling into the trap of militarism and exclusionism.

The polemical onslaught that descended on Stone was not long in coming. He had stripped away a bit of the moral righteousness and arrogance that has always surrounded the American Zionist movement, and his intellectual credentials for doing so had to be raked over. In the October issue of *Midstream*, a Zionist journal sponsored by the Theodore Herzl Foundation, there appeared not one, not two, but *three* separate articles—a virtual intellectual gang tackle on Stone. Not to be outdone, *Commentary* magazine, published by the American Jewish Committee, devoted lead articles in two successive issues to raking Mr. Stone over the coals with largely the same arguments as those already set forth in the articles in *Midstream*.

Stone's reputation as an independent journalist, of course, is secure enough to survive such onslaughts. Indeed, Mr. Stone, who has never had the inclination for such polemical infighting, is a little oblivious to the whole controversy. He doesn't mind people taking issue with him. He feels he has had his say and others now have the right to theirs. If anything troubles him, it is the thought that the moral complacency and self-

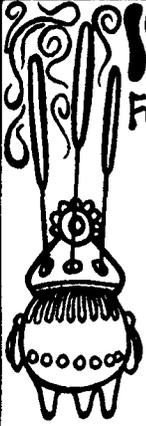
righteousness exhibited by Israel's most fervid American supporters will make it more difficult for the self-examination and criticism that Israel needs if she is to find reconciliation with the Arabs.

Stone's criticism of Israel, like his critique of American policy, is a criticism of love, and it is as shameful to charge him with an anti-Israel animus as it was to suggest, as many did during the McCarthy period, that he is anti-American. The irony is that Stone, above all others in the "opposition," has a rather Burkean concern for the social fabric of this society. Speaking to me of the Negro revolution he said, "I don't want to burn this country down. I love it. It's awfully hard to have a decent society. Look at all the new countries—they are awfully hard on their people. I feel we have a pretty good society. In how many countries is there a tradition of a free press?"

These are sentiments that could have been uttered by James Reston, Eric Sevareid or Max Lerner. His "politics" do not distinguish Stone from the mainstream of American journalism. If you ask him, Stone will identify himself as a man of the left and a socialist, but that doesn't really mean very much because he has been, as time allowed, as critical of "socialist" societies and of the left as he has been of mainstream America. In an interview with Tony Howard of the *London Observer* he replied to the question of whether he would have seen the need for his weekly if there were a successful socialist movement in the United States: "Well, socialist governments have tended to be very disappointing—especially in England I might say. And all governments need independent watchdogs to keep an eye on them."

The image of the journalist as a guardian of the public welfare is a convenient cliché which might find its way into almost any high school journalism class. But few of Stone's colleagues have helped him breathe life back into the platitude. If there were more, we would not now be celebrating the simple achievements of a quiet and unspectacular man who turns out more important copy than the mass of Pulitzer Prize journalists backed up by their monolithic institutions. Izzy Stone has taken upon himself the painful role of watchdog in a time when most of his colleagues bark rarely and bite not at all.

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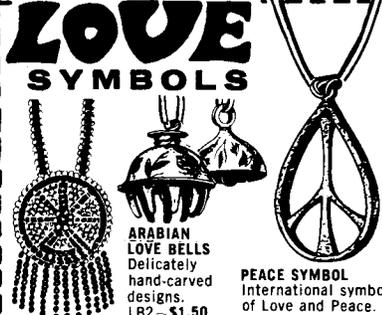
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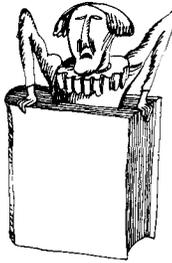
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Reviewed by *Nicholas Samstag*

YOU'RE NOT REALLY A MAN until you've had your novel pulped. I have—and, take it from me, it's a lot worse than a bad cold. I called Doubleday not long ago to

order 20 copies of *Come and See My Shining Palace* at the author's discount (though I'd give them to some masochistic friends for Christmas).

"I'm sorry; we have no more of that title," said the cheery-throaty miss I usually talk to when replenishing stock. I knew that Shiny Pal hadn't been selling like *Valley of the Dolls* but it's out less than a year and the reviews were good.

"Oh, well," I said, swallowing a sob. "Give me the name of one of the outfits remaindering it somewhere around New York."

There was a short pause. "Maybe I'd better ask Mr. Barker to call you back," the voice said, more throaty, less cheery.

"You know," said Mr. Barker the next day, "we don't remainder anymore. It doesn't pay with all that packing and shipping and billing and stuff."

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