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I.F. Stone's journalism

American muck-raker

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THE prediction that Isador Feinstein Stone, America's most celebrated investigative journalist, made to his wife proved right. "Honey", he told her, "I'm going to graduate from a pariah to a character, and then if I live long enough I'll be regarded as a national institution." He lived long enough. By the time he died in 1989 at the age of 81, I.F. "Izzy" Stone was embraced by a political and media establishment that had shunned him in his prime as, in his words, "a Red Jew son-of-a-bitch".

Stone missed his enemies. He thrived on their hatred and came into his own in the 1950s when he was deprived of his passport, blacklisted by editors and subjected to physical surveillance by the FBI as a suspected Russian spy. Undeterred, he founded *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, a muck-raking journal that D.D. Guttenplan, his biographer, describes as the longest essay in single-handed journalism in American history. It came out for 19 years, ran to 3.5m words and hit a peak circulation of 70,000 that included just about everybody who mattered in Washington, DC.

Richard Nixon, then the vice-president, was among Stone's first targets as "a young man who symbolises a slick kind of Arrow-collared fascism" and remained in his sights until the Watergate scandal. Hollywood actors and others who defied McCarthyite demands to name communist associates could count on his support. So could black civil-rights activists. Many of Stone's weekly scoops came from his close reading of turgid government documents. He habitually quarried the end-notes and the smallest print. His exposure of the Pentagon's fabrications did much to foment opposition to the Vietnam war.

Stone's muck-raking continued a rich American tradition. He was inspired by journalists such as Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell who exposed corruption in high places, and in turn inspired a younger generation. His influence can be seen in the Watergate scoops of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the revelation of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam by Seymour Hersh and the uncovering of multiple political and corporate misdeeds in the *Village Voice* by two of his fellow leftists, Alexander Cockburn and James Ridgeway.

However, Stone's indignation about abuses of state power and infringements of civil liberties could be selective. He did not write a word in protest when in 1942 President Franklin Roosevelt signed an order that led to the internment of more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans and was happy to contemplate government actions against the far right that he

American Radical:
The Life and Times
of I.F. Stone
By D.D. Guttenplan



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deplored when directed at the far left. The excesses of the so-called permissive society appalled him. Liberals, he believed, betrayed the cause of freedom when they made "a fast and dirty buck" from pornography.

Stone was not a member of the Communist Party but he moved comfortably in party circles and, as an instinctual Popular Fronter, deplored factionalism on the left. Nonetheless, as Mr Guttenplan notes, Stone was an unusual "engaged" journalist. He listened carefully and took seriously the arguments of his opponents and sometimes even criticised his fellow leftists, especially those unwilling to admit the brutal tyranny of Stalinist Russia. His fellow Jews were criticised for not supporting the creation of a Palestinian homeland.

In his old age Stone found refuge from left-wing factionalism in classical literature. He read André Gide in French, Thomas Mann in German, the Bible in Hebrew and wrote an investigative account of the trial of Socrates. Like his famous weekly, these were remarkable achievements for a college drop-out and a former pariah.

American Radical: The Life and Times of I.F. Stone.
By D.D. Guttenplan.
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National institution