

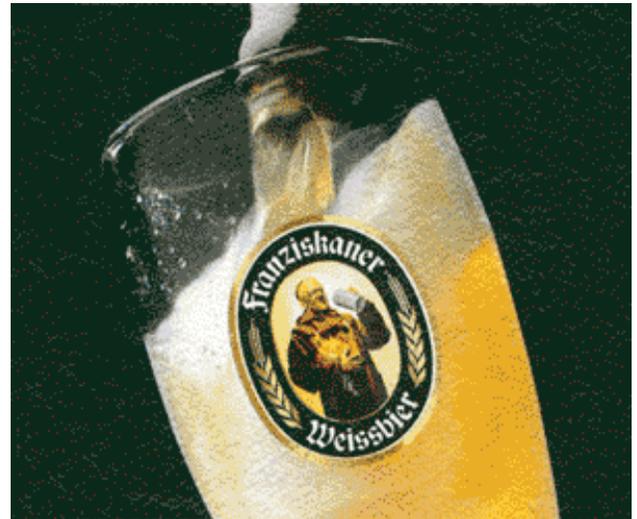


Armed With Words: D.D. Guttenplan's *The Life and Times of I.F. Stone*

A new biography examines the
 career of one of journalism's
 great crusaders

By Tom Robbins

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Celia Gilbert, Family Collection



A sober skepticism: Izzy Stone

Details:

American Radical: The Life and

For almost 20 years, those smart enough to read I.F. Stone's four-page newsweekly got America's best bargain in journalism. The Lippmanns, the Restons, and the other Brahmins of the punditry class collected the big prizes, but the scoops and the against-the-official-grain critiques were to be found in the self-published *I.F. Stone's Weekly*. For \$5 a year when it began in 1953 (initially from an office at 401 Broadway), readers received searing government exposés, along with an essayist who understood, like his hero Tom Paine, that words are weapons. "The question is whether we are to relinquish the standards of Jefferson for those of Torquemada," he wrote in one of his first issues, launched into the teeth of the McCarthy inquisition.

Stone was still going strong a dozen years later when he deconstructed the Johnson administration's fraudulent claims about Vietnam. After the Tonkin Gulf incident provided the cover story for that savage war's first wave of escalation, Stone alone pointed out that "one bullet embedded in one destroyer hull" was the sole proof offered of the allegedly unprovoked attack by North Vietnamese gunboats. He used statistics buried in an appendix to a State Department White Paper

Times of I.F. Stone

By D.D. Guttenplan

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an appendix to a State Department white paper urging a wider war to show that 95 percent of the Viet Cong's weaponry came, not from the Soviet bloc, but from American arms provided to the South Vietnamese.

Such lonely detective work made him an icon to young rebels then massing on the New Left. He was the only journalist invited to speak at the first antiwar demonstration in Washington, D.C., in April 1965, organized by Students for a Democratic Society. He stood onstage that day, alongside Phil Ochs and the beautiful Baez sisters, a stout man with thick spectacles and a hearing aid, winning wild cheers from a crowd of men and women half his age.

Most of us who cheered Stone back then didn't realize that this was already the second act of a remarkable career. That's a gap filled in detail by *American Radical*, the adoringly exhaustive survey of Stone's life by D.D. Guttenplan, a former *Newsday* reporter who was also my able *Voice* editor briefly in the 1980s. His book also tells the parable of how the man who was arguably the greatest investigative reporter of his time (now crowned as well as the first blogger) went from journalism star to—as he called himself in 1952, when anti-communist fears left him jobless—"a ghost."

Until that point, Izzy Stone, born in 1907 in Philadelphia, had been pretty successful. He had a regular newspaper column in the 1940s, first for *PM*, New York's left-wing daily, and later for its successor, *The Daily Compass*. He did double-time as *The Nation's* Washington correspondent, and was an early regular on *Meet the Press*, where he delighted in skewering official guests.

Then there was Stone's greatest journalistic coup, one that goes counter to his myth as a left-wing Cassandra. That was when he boarded an unstable and overcrowded tramp ship filled with "displaced persons"—homeless Jews from the camps of Europe—trying to sneak around the British army into Palestine. Stone's stories boosted *PM's* thin circulation, and he later wrote a book about his adventures, *Underground to Palestine*. He became a Hollywood footnote when the American crew of the ship *Exodus* was recruited at his Washington home.

In typical Stone fashion, he spoiled this party as well. Israel, he wrote, was doomed to failure unless it accommodated its own displaced people, Palestinian Arabs, in a bi-national state.

The TV invitations ended when he got his own McCarthy-era knock on the door. The State Department reclaimed his passport. The FBI launched full-scale surveillance, including mail intercepts, phone taps, and excavations of the Stone family trash. Stone would have qualified for much of this attention simply by dint of his many left-wing associations, says Guttenplan, who obtained his FBI file. Although never a capital-C communist, Stone flaunted his many radical sympathies. As a young reporter in Philadelphia, he hitchhiked to Boston to attend the 1927 execution of Sacco and Vanzetti when his bosses refused to send him to cover the event.

But there were also darker shadows cast against his name, ones that—20 years after his death in 1989—are still trotted out by those hoping to dirty him up. A few years ago, declassified records of the thrillingly named Venona project, which cracked the Soviet's secret wartime cable code, showed that the KGB had at one point sought to recruit a journalist thought to be Stone and code-

named Blin (as in blini, as in pancake). If so, the Reds didn't seem to find much use for him since there were no more pancake references, and the FBI's intense scrutiny (which the nearsighted Stone never even noticed) yielded no treasonous contacts.

Other aspersions came from an out-of-work KGB agent peddling his memoirs, who, in 1992, coyly suggested that Stone had once been on his payroll. Oleg Kalugin's cover job in the '60s was press attaché for the Soviet embassy, and he had dined with Stone, as he did with other American reporters. In fact, as Guttenplan reports, Stone made a point of delightedly taking the Russkie to J. Edgar Hoover's favorite restaurant. Kalugin later claimed he'd been misunderstood, only to offer other, equally vague insinuations that still provide fodder for Stone throwers to this day.

The more interesting question raised in *American Radical*, however, has less to do with Stone's patriotism than with his inspiration. Guttenplan holds that, shorn of his radical roots and inclinations, Stone's masterful investigative swordplay would amount to little more than a reporter with a high batting average. Maybe so. But Stone was always more independent than radical. That streak was on display in his post-*Weekly* career, when he wrote a devastating 1972 series for *The New York Review of Books* about the perverted use of Soviet psychiatry to suppress dissent. In the end, his sober skepticism and relentless drive for truth-telling were far more useful and reliable guides than any ideology. And those lighthouses usually shine a path straight to the downtrodden and the underdogs anyway. You don't even need a map.