

The Importance of Dissent

Myra MacPherson

April 21, 2014

Myra MacPherson is a best-selling author and journalist.

I have just been reminded of how young most of you are and how this is going to sound like ancient history, so I'll have to explain a bit about who I. F. Stone is.

There's a very simple sentence, "Without dissent there can be no democracy." It makes absolute sense, but it's not followed by many American journalists. The topic today is the importance of dissent in American journalism, though generally we ought to be talking about the suppression of dissent in American journalism. One of the greatest examples of a singular journalist who was hounded by the FBI, who were attempting to suppress his voice, was I. F. Stone. He kept to his principle of uncovering and speaking out about truths that no one wanted printed, while scorned, ostracized, belittled, and marginalized by everybody else in what was known as mainstream journalism. This is throughout the 1940s, '50s, and almost into the '60s.

He was called Izzy by everybody, from his friend Albert Einstein to Marilyn Monroe, who bought his wonderful weekly when she was in her liberated stage, and Eleanor Roosevelt. By the end of his career, he was not only famous, but celebrated by the many lapdog mainstream journalists who originally dismissed him as a feisty, scruffy outsider. Izzy Stone has two major awards in his honor. One is by the Neiman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, and this goes to one independent journalist every year. The other one is awarded by the Park Center for Independent Media at Ithaca College, directed by a major independent journalist who founded the media watch group FAIR, Jeff Cohen. Content to be outside the pack of cautious journalism, Cohen was relentless in his attack on the failures of mainstream media. This year they're giving the award to Nick Turse, who wrote a book called *Kill Anything That Moves*, titled from the slogan that came to represent the systematic approach to winning the Vietnam War: the top-down orders, the perverted measurement of "victory" by an official body count, all of which encouraged atrocities.¹ Amy Goodman has won the Izzy Stone award in the past. We do find really good people out there today who emulate Izzy's process.

Izzy always said that there were three rules to follow in journalism. The first was to go into the bowels of the government and never go to the top. The lies start at the top. We all know in Washington that it's their job to spin. His line "All governments lie," still holds true, and the second part of that line also still holds true: "but disaster lies in wait for countries whose leaders smoke the same hashish they

give out.” I’m sure we can see a lot of hashish-using in our current administration because they’re giving out a great deal that’s not true. I love this one line, “How do you know a president is lying? His lips are moving.” It was first used to describe Nixon. And we can now say that about Obama. All government officials only want to tell half-truths at best, to bolster and present only their side. The journalist’s job is to get behind the spin that they give you. We can obviously talk about the most current issue, which is the treatment of Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning and Edward Snowden. The irony is the price that they’ve had to pay for speaking out and giving us truth. The Pulitzer Prize given to the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* for the information that Snowden gave to them, that Pulitzer Prize destroys the notion that Snowden is a traitor. Yet he is still a fugitive, and Manning is serving a thirty-five-year sentence for telling the truth, including releasing that incredible footage of a helicopter gunning down civilians in Iraq. The important thing for you to remember is that this suppression is not a new phenomenon.

Everyone seems to feel that since 9/11, fear of terrorism has given American policy a new cast, and it’s just not true. I’m going to read you something that I think will really amaze you. To impede and punish these men, Obama has resurrected an espionage law used in World War I to put people like anti-draft leader Eugene Debs in prison and to wage a war on anybody on the left that they assumed were “reds.” “No other country had ever legitimized the right to free speech and dissent; now federal officials were attacking every vestige of those freedoms. Well-funded superpatriot groups spurred citizens to boycott any group or publication amorphously deemed unpatriotic.”²

Did you hear that on Fox News today? No. The same excuses for surveillance were used then, in 1919, as now. This was, of course, talking about the 1919 riots after the Palmer Raids:

Attorney General Mitchell Palmer envisioned Reds as a lethal infestation, “eating its way into the homes of the American workman.” A man uninterested in the measured phrase, Palmer [described them as], “the sharp tongues of revolutionary heat . . . licking at the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace marriage vows with libertine laws, burning up the foundations of society.” The Daughters of the American Revolution denounced immigrants as “these foreign leeches” to be “cast out.”³

So what happened when they used this law?

More than ten thousand suspected communists and anarchists were arrested. No evidence was found of a proposed revolution. Arrested without warrants, the majority were guilty of nothing more than not being born in America. Agents forged incriminating documents to deport innocent people caught in illegal raids. . . . Nearly a hundred men had been arrested in Bridgeport Connecticut and [among the things that happened to prisoners like these, they were] “kept in jail for five months; beaten, starved, suffocated, tortured, and threatened with death in futile attempts to extract admissions.” Some were contained for up to sixty hours in suffocating heat over the pump room of a boiler.⁴

These illegal actions were decried in a major report compiled by furious lawyers, led by the future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter.

The report noted, “Of the men still held at the time of the report, at least a majority had no political views of any special nature.” Workmen from Russia who spoke little or no English were

“practically buried alive for five months.” Innocent Russians were rounded up at concerts or at night study classes. . . . In Detroit, eight hundred men were imprisoned without charges for three to six days in a narrow windowless corridor with only one toilet to share. Their crime: attending a dance class or having eaten at a Communist Party headquarters.⁵

By the way, the Communist Party was legal, up until the mid-1950s. “In Boston, hundreds were shackled together and paraded before jeering mobs. The report’s conclusion minced no words: ‘We feel justified in branding attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer as the biggest violator of the law in the United States.’”⁶

And this was what really galvanized Izzy to pursue his life-long crusade to report injustice and the misuse of power. In fact, he was absolutely thrilled, in the 1930s, when he went into the bowels of the government and found someone who would leak information. He was targeted for the rest of his life by the FBI and by J. Edgar Hoover, who said, “Let’s get anything we can on him.” And this was just a journalist writing and disseminating knowledge for people on what the FBI was doing. The FBI launched character investigations into workers in many agencies, sometimes over and over again. The invasions of privacy remain chilling when you read about them now. They asked these kinds of questions: “Does he mix with Negroes? Does he seem to have too many Jewish friends? Does his face light up when the Red Army is mentioned? Does he turn first to Russian news in the paper? Is he always criticizing Vichy France?” That was always worth criticizing because they were aligned to the Nazis. The questions continued:

“Is he faithful to his wife? Does he think that the colored races are as good as the white? Why do you suppose he has hired so many Jews? Is it true he reads *The Nation* and *The New Republic*? Does he buy out-of-town newspapers? How often does he read *PM*? Does he talk a lot against the poll tax? Do you think he is obsessive in opposition to fascism or Nazism? Did you ever hear him whistle or sing the communistic ‘Internationale’ or other subversive songs?” Stone noted, “Questions like these are being used as a sieve to strain antifascists and liberals out of the government. They serve no other purpose. You don’t look for enemy agents or sympathizers among people who read *PM*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*. . . .”⁷

He said “ordinary, decent people” were being absolutely hounded.

By then, J. Edgar Hoover was the sacred cow FBI director and the battle between Izzy and him was like David and Goliath. But Hoover got his start back during the Palmer raids I just mentioned, when he was an unknown young zealot. During World War II and the Cold War, Hoover collected specious stuff and put it into files, filled with accusations from unnamed sources. Izzy called some who received FBI money “paid moochers.” Then he gave the files to the “witch hunting” House Un-American Activities Committee. I don’t know how many of you have seen *Good Night and Good Luck*. As good as it is, it’s a minor indication of what went on, and even Edward R. Murrow said he was late to the game. He said that Izzy was one of the very first on this. What they did was send all this garbage out, and then it was leaked to favorable newspapers, mainstream newspapers. And then the newspapers were so cowardly that they fired reporters who had been mentioned by anyone. It was a very, very scary time in America,

and I encourage you to read more about it. Izzy was tracked to the point where the FBI had five thousand files on this man, who was a journalist and nothing else. It took me ten years with the Freedom of Information Act to get them, and then when I got them, much of it was redacted. They tried so hard to find that he was a communist.

He was a leftist. He was part of the popular front, preceding World War II, when the liberal left sided with the Spanish Republic, which had been legally elected. Then the other side, the fascists, came in, and they were having this incredible war. At one point Izzy was asked whether he was on the side of Stalin (who sent troops to fight in the Spanish Civil War) before and during World War II, and he said, “Which side were *you* on, *Hitler*?” There was not what we call a “grey area” for people in that period of time, and this was a time when a lot of the Stalin atrocities were not known.

When the FBI tried to find something about Izzy—some of the files are absolutely laughable—they followed him into a cigar store. They collected all his garbage. They took down the license plates of anyone who came to visit him. He was such a scourge in people’s minds that he was once at a party and another journalist said that he could lose his job because Izzy Stone was in the room. So he was made into this pariah. And the whole point about Izzy is that he really loved this country, and he loved the First Amendment, and it upset him when he saw it being violated. One time, as he was walking across Capitol Hill and no journalists would talk to him, he shook his fist at the Capitol and said, “I might just be a Jew SOB Red to you, but I’m keeping Jefferson alive.”

The second lesson he gave was to always read the documents. Izzy had a major handicap for a journalist. He was deaf and legally blind at the age of thirty-seven. So what he did, because he couldn’t understand a lot of what was being said in press conferences, was go and read the documents. He found scoops in the documents that all the other journalists had overlooked and were too lazy to follow up on. The major scoop, what really made him known, was that he was the first to blow the whistle on the Gulf of Tonkin, the American excuse for escalating the war in Vietnam. It was a sham, and after reading the documents he said in 1964 that very few Americans were aware of the true circumstances, which cast a very different light on the Tonkin affair. He was quite alone as he tore apart the official mythology of the Tonkin Gulf excuse. He consistently ran remarks of the lone antiwar voices like Senators Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening, and he dryly observed the press, which dropped an iron curtain that ignored their pleas. The central problem that he always talked about is that the process of brainwashing the public starts with off-the-record briefings for newspapermen. It was in these meetings that all sorts of farfetched theories were suggested to explain the timing of the Gulf of Tonkin “attack,” and why the North Vietnamese Navy would be mad enough to venture an attack on the Seventh Fleet, one of the world’s most powerful. At the time Stone added that everything was suggested except the possibility that the

attack might have been provoked, which we later found out to be the truth. And he underlined that; he was able to say it. He just forged ahead with it.

It might not seem monumental to you now, but at the time it was. Had mainstream reporters and TV personalities like Walter Cronkite listened we may never have had this horrible ten-year war (Cronkite came to it very late, after the Tet Offensive). I know that Daniel Ellsberg was here recently. Izzy was a hero to Ellsberg. He spotted him in 1971, having lunch alone in the Senate Cafeteria as he often did—that's Izzy—and Ellsberg sat down and told Stone he was a fan and brought up his briefcase, his gold mine of secrets which were the Pentagon Papers. Ellsberg told me that when they started talking about Vietnam, tears came to Stone's eyes. Ellsberg no longer knew what to say—this is an anecdote that I got from Ellsberg himself—to cheer him up or to get his opinion. Ellsberg suddenly told Stone about the Pentagon Papers. And reflecting on the meeting years later, Ellsberg had no explanation as to why Stone, the great bird dog, the great scoop hunter of America, didn't pursue this incredible scoop. But he surmised that Izzy felt these secrets needed a more establishment airing. That was Izzy, being willing to give up the greatest story of his life knowing that it would not be as well believed as it would if it was in the *New York Times*.

Just to give you a quick idea of who Izzy was, he started out as a journalist in the 1920s and 1930s. He was the youngest editorial writer in America writing about Hitler. He was twenty-one years old, and he was mourning a world that Hitler was going to take over if someone didn't stop him. All through the 1930s and '40s, Izzy was ahead of the pack on such pivotal trends as the rise of Hitler and fascism, disastrous Cold War foreign policies, illegal FBI and CIA spying, civil rights, and McCarthyism, always lacing his substance with wit. His immediacy and relevance leaps off the pages as if he had just written them this morning, highlighting the ever-present need for dissenting, questioning voices. He had the mind of a scholar, but he also had the wit of Stephen Colbert. His punchy one-liners got to be quite famous. And he got to be famous because when all of the leftist newspapers folded because of McCarthyism in 1952, he had no money, had nothing to do, and so he started this little four-page weekly. It was a mom-and-pop weekly, and his wife did the billing. At the end, he had 70,000 subscribers and many of the men who wrote wonderful reviews of my book were the younger generation who read him during that period, and they had gone on to be journalists themselves. There was such a reverence for him. Carl Bernstein was a neighbor and learned everything he could about looking up things from Izzy. So there was Izzy, with nothing, and he eventually earned \$350,000 a year for a little rag that he put together on the kitchen table. He always joked that he was a war profiteer, because he made his money writing about the war, avidly read by anti-war protestors. He was very funny. After an appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show*, he looked at himself and said, "Good God, I look like a Jewish bullfrog!" He was often puckish, but he could also be horribly dispassionate about people he didn't like. He just would not give

you the time of day. If you went to his house for dinner, you had better make sure that you'd read the papers because he would not even want to talk to you if you didn't know anything.

I twin him in the book with Walter Lippmann quite a bit, because it's very important for young people who read this book to recognize that, basically, there are only two kinds of reporters, insiders and outsiders. You can argue that they get scoops from playing tennis with Poppy Bush—as they used to call George Bush—but you are only getting what he wants leaked. I really think that it's very hard not to get caught up in being a part of what's going on. There's an enormous amount of flattery that goes on. Izzy's great line about that was, "Don't get conned by flattery and get cozy with officials. You've really got to wear a chastity belt in Washington to preserve your journalist virginity. Once the secretary of state invites you to lunch and asks your opinion, you're sunk." We know a lot of these people today, one of whose initials are Chris Matthews. If you watch him, there's hardly ever a time that he doesn't say "my friend" and it's about some high official. Is that any way to be a journalist? It's certainly not high in my book.

We do have journalists who are far removed from the main pack: Bob Parry, from Consortium News, and Amy Goodman. And what I think is terribly important to understand is that when people talk about objectivity, there is really no such thing as objectivity. There is fairness, but there's no objectivity. The moment you write a lead, you pick one thing out to be the most important thing in the article or that you're going to give to somebody on a radio or TV show. You're making a selection. It's just like all points: it's a point of view. And so when people talk about objectivity, I call it fake objectivity. That's this concept of getting the voice of one official, and then the voice of another official, and then calling that objectivity. Many, many other voices are never heard from in this model, particularly on the left. The media make up a very skewed, small part of what should be listened to, or read, or covered. And I know there are going to be many different challenges with the Internet, as there already are. When someone tweets something and it goes all over the place, you don't know how much of it is actually true. How much of it are you even able to follow up and actually read? I, half the time, am reading half of this and half of that. I think there's value in that you can find Al Jazeera; you can find a good Australian newspaper; you can find the *Guardian*; you can find a lot of good columnists that you cannot find in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. I think we're in such a revolutionary stage, and it's an interesting point.

But I still think that Izzy's three points apply. We really have to be aware that we are being lied to. You need to go underneath to find some other source. You have to read the documents, and you can't be gulled by some sweet "How are you?" from someone important. You can almost see it when you go to a party, you hear an official say "Hi, Myra. . ." It's like somebody's told them that's your name, and you're supposed to be flattered because you've just been greeted by your first name by someone that you're supposed to be writing about. It's hard, as he said, to keep your "virginity."

I want to finish with this. I just saw Errol Morris' documentary on Donald Rumsfeld, and I find that what he said in 1961 about the presidential and the Pentagon mindset is just very much a part of the thoughts that you will always hear from people like Rumsfeld and other officials. Rumsfeld was talking about this in 1961, which was at the very beginning of the Vietnam War, but Izzy didn't swallow his stuff. Izzy had been very prepared because one of his best friends was Bernard Fall, a great French historian who was killed in Vietnam in 1967. They were mutual friends and they spent a lot of time talking, and if you read any of Fall's books, such as *Street Without Joy*, you can't imagine why anybody would have said that we could win in Vietnam.⁸ It was just ludicrous. Anyway, this is Izzy's line; he made this comment about the Pentagon myopia about war, its destruction, and why people fight back. He was speaking to an article that had been expressly used by the Pentagon on dealing with wars:

It was written by men "watching a dance from outside through heavy plate glass windows. They see the motions, but they can't hear the music. . . . What rarely comes through to them are the injured racial feelings, the misery, the rankling slights, the hatred, the devotion, the inspiration and the desperation. So they do not really understand what leads men to abandon wife, children, home, career and friends; to take to the bush and live gun in hand like a hunted animal; to challenge overwhelming military odds rather than acquiesce any longer in humiliation, injustice or poverty."⁹

Doesn't that sound like today?

NOTES

1. Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Picador, 2013). The "Izzy Award" of the Park Center for Independent Media at Ithaca College was awarded reporting on the deaths along the U.S./Mexican border.
2. Myra MacPherson, *All Governments Lie: The Life and Times of Rebel Journalist I.F. Stone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 56.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.
8. Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Military History Series, 2005). The book was originally published in 1961.
9. MacPherson, *All Governments Lie*, p. 394. Stone was referring to the 1957 *Revue Militaire d'Information*.