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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion | RULING CLASS JOURNALISTS

By Richard Harwood

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In its 70-year history, the quarterly journal *Foreign Affairs* has had but five editors. The fifth, recently appointed, is James Hoge, former publisher of the *New York Daily News* and before that editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The quarterly is published by the Council on Foreign Relations, whose members are the nearest thing we have to a ruling establishment in the United States.

The president is a member. So is his secretary of state, the deputy secretary of state, all five of the undersecretaries, several of the assistant secretaries and the department's legal adviser. The president's national security adviser and his deputy are members. The director of Central Intelligence (like all previous directors) and the chairman of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board are members. The secretary of defense, three undersecretaries and at least four assistant secretaries are members. The secretaries of the departments of housing and urban development, interior, health and human services and the chief White House public relations man, David Gergen, are members, along with the speaker of the House and the majority leader of the Senate.

This is not a retinue of people who "look like America," as the president once put it, but they very definitely look like the people who, for more than half a century, have managed our international affairs and our military-industrial complex. John W. Davis, a Wall Street lawyer, was chosen as the council's first president in 1921 and three years later was the Democratic candidate for president against Calvin Coolidge. His successors at the council were from the same mold -- financiers, corporate lawyers and industrialists. John J. McCloy, described by Richard Rovere years ago as the patriarch of the American establishment, served as council chairman from 1953 until 1970. Allen Dulles, first head of the CIA, was a council director for 42 years and was its president from 1946 until 1950. David Rockefeller succeeded McCloy, serving as chairman from 1970 until 1985. His successor is Peter Peterson.

Today, two-thirds of the council's more than 2,000 members live in either New York or Washington and, as you would expect, include many of the leading figures of American political life: Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Cyrus Vance, McGeorge Bundy, Gov. Mario Cuomo and so on. Captains of industry and finance, the big universities, the big law firms and the big foundations are heavily represented. That is the way it has always been.

What is distinctively modern about the council these days is the considerable involvement of journalists and other media figures, who account for more than 10 percent of the membership. Walter Lippmann was a director of the council in the 1930s, but he was *sui generis*. It was not until the late 1960s that journalists began showing up with some frequency on the council's board and in the membership lists. Hoge's appointment to the Foreign Affairs editorship is symbolic of their rising influence. So is the election of Leslie Gelb as the council's new president, succeeding Peter Tarnoff, who has gone to the State Department. Gelb for many years was a reporter and columnist for the New York Times and was a State Department official in the Carter administration.

In the past 15 years, council directors have included Hedley Donovan of Time Inc., Elizabeth Drew of the New Yorker, Philip Geyelin of The Washington Post, Karen Elliott House of the Wall Street Journal and Strobe Talbott of Time magazine, who is now President Clinton's ambassador at large in the Slavic world. The editorial page editor, deputy editorial page editor, executive editor, managing editor, foreign editor, national affairs editor, business and financial editor and various writers as well as Katharine Graham, the paper's principal owner, represent The Washington Post in the council's membership. The executive editor, managing editor and foreign editor of the New York Times are members, along with executives of such other large newspapers as the Wall Street Journal and Los Angeles Times, the weekly newsmagazines, network television executives and celebrities -- Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw and Jim Lehrer, for example -- and various columnists, among them Charles Krauthammer, William Buckley, George Will and Jim Hoagland.

The membership of these journalists in the council, however they may think of themselves, is an acknowledgment of their active and important role in public affairs and of their ascension into the American ruling class. They do not merely analyze and interpret foreign policy for the United States; they help make it. Their influence, Jon Vanden Heuvel speculates in an article in the Media Studies Journal, is likely to increase now that the Cold War has ended: "By focusing on particular crises around the world {the media are in a better position} to pressure government to act. ... Humanitarianism has taken on new dimensions as a component of American foreign policy, and the media are largely responsible."

Somalia is Exhibit A. American troops are there, it is generally believed, because of a decision by NBC to air BBC film of starving Somalian children. It set off a chain reaction in the press and humanitarian concern among the public, forcing the Bush administration to intervene. It is also arguable that the troops will be coming out soon because of film of a captured airman and of a dead soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu.

Is there something unethical in these new relationships, some great danger that conflicts of interest are bound to arise when journalists get cheek and jowl with the establishment? Probably not. They are part of that establishment whether they like it or not, sharing most of its values and world views. In any case, they must deal with it daily in their professional lives, even to learning which forks to use.