

Heart of Stone

Erwin Knoll on
I.F. Stone and the
value of skepticism.

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Erwin Knoll has been editor since 1973 of the *Progressive*, a national magazine of investigative reporting, political analysis and commentary published in Madison. The magazine was founded by Robert M. La Follette Sr. in 1909. A graduate of New York University, Knoll covered politics for the *Washington Post*, was Washington editor for the *Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service* and, during the Johnson administration, covered the White House for the *Newhouse National News Service*. In Washington, he lived within blocks of I.F. Stone, the legendary investigative journalist whose fact-laden *I.F. Stone's Weekly* eventually reached 70,000 paid subscribers. Knoll met regularly with Stone, taking long walks and, along with other friends, giving him copies of *White House* news releases Stone couldn't get because his weekly did not have White House accreditation. When Stone died recently at 82, Knoll was remembering his old friend and mentor.

"Izzy had the ability—at all times and in all situations—to cut through the bullshit. He called things what they were.

"I have a sign over my desk that quotes Izzy Stone. It says: 'All govern-



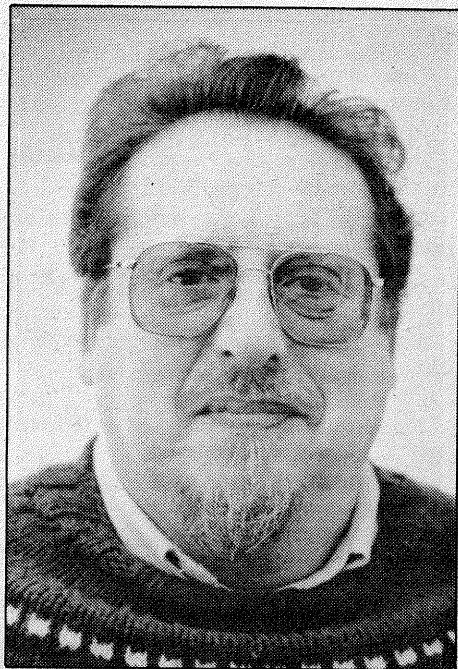
ments are run by liars. Nothing they say should be believed.' Now those are words to live by.

"Why did he say that?"

"He didn't believe that the people who run governments are inherently worse than all other people. On the contrary, he believed that they were just like all other people, and that all of us, if we are given positions of power, will resort to anything, including lying, to hold on to that power.

"That's why there was always reason to be profoundly skeptical of those who hold power, because they would do whatever was necessary in their own interests. All of us act in our own interests. Not to do so is irrational. But those who hold power over the rest of us have interests that conflict with ours. Izzy understood that, and it informed his work as a journalist for more than six decades.

"I remember when he was learning Greek, and with what excitement he told of reading Aristotle's definition of politics. Aristotle had said: 'Politics is about the conflict between those who have been favored by fortune and those



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Knoll: 'Izzy taught us that journalism wasn't just a job.'

who have not been so favored.' That, Izzy said, was the only definition you'd ever need. Politics was the ongoing struggle between the rich-and-powerful and the poor-and-powerless.

Izzy was always very clear about which side he stood on in that struggle, and he wanted us to know which side he stood on. He felt that if we knew which side he stood on, we could make up our own minds whether to believe him or not.

"But he didn't hide behind some kind of sterile, fraudulent, pseudo-objective *pretending* to be neutral, which we see every day on the front pages of all the newspapers and hear every night in all the network television newscasts. In promulgating this kind of journalism that is deeply committed, he taught us how to do it.

"When I say 'us,' I mean several generations of journalists who stand immeasurably in his debt for showing us that we had a real calling to do something about the pathetic state of the world and the pain that is the human condition.

"Izzy taught us that journalism wasn't just a job. We weren't supposed to be hacks of some corporate media entity that pays us to go out and do a routine job of providing words to fit between the ads. It was a serious business, this journalism that Izzy Stone practiced.

"He did most of his brilliant reporting by reading documents, by paying attention, by doing the hard, tedious work: ploughing through the Congressional Record every day; ploughing through committee transcripts, ploughing through official reports and statements. That's how he found the nuggets of information that the rest of us—the lazy and incompetent rest of us—missed. Izzy Stone found the contradictions that eluded all of us who report the news, and he did it wonderfully well." ■