

# Real Journalists

## Erwin Knoll and his mentor, Izzy Stone.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

At a time when we need him most, Erwin Knoll is gone from us, his skeptical voice silent, his questioning eyes closed. What would Erwin Knoll have made of what William Safire called the monstrous tsunami that engulfed America last week?

Can you hear him saying: "That tsunami is here to stay. Build an ark."

Erwin, of course, was neither a Republican nor a Democrat. He often stated in public that neither party was worth voting for, so he gave his vote, and his heart, to neither.

His heart he gave to journalism. More specifically, he gave his heart to *The Progressive*, a magazine of political analysis founded in 1909 by Robert M. La Follette Sr. Erwin was editor of *The Progressive* from 1973 up until his death two weeks ago.

*The Progressive's* circulation is truly minuscule compared to the elephantine numbers of the mainstream media, and no one ever got rich working for it. Nonetheless, *The Progressive* is a little mouse that roars. Indeed, it is a mouse that can panic the elephant, especially when it gets right in the elephant's face and up the elephant's nose.

The magazine did exactly that when it defied the U.S. government, who deemed it would be a treasonable act to publish the "formula" for creating an H-bomb. *The Progressive* printed it and was upheld in the courts.

While living in Washington, Erwin covered politics for the *Washington Post* and other papers. He told me that he became thoroughly disillusioned with the *Post* the day Nikita Khrushchev caught President Dwight D. Eisenhower in a lie. Prior to this, Khrushchev had announced that the Soviets had shot down a U.S. spy plane over their soil and produced photographs of the wreckage. Eisenhower stated that because of navigational errors, the spy plane had probably "strayed off course." Triumphantly the Soviets then produced the U-2 pilot, Francis Gary Powers, who was alive and talking. The U-2 fly-overs were no longer a state secret.

In an elevator Erwin commented to a *Post* editor that this was one hell of a surprising story. The editor, according to Erwin, said, "Oh, we've known about those flights for years." Erwin was stunned that newspaper editors would conspire to withhold truth from their readers. "Why the hell did they call themselves journalists?" Erwin asked.

A real journalist in Erwin's mind was I.F. "Izzy" Stone, the investigative journalist who published *I.F. Stone's Weekly*. His influence on Erwin was profound, as Erwin acknowledged in the following interview with *Isthmus* upon the death of his friend and mentor in 1989.

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

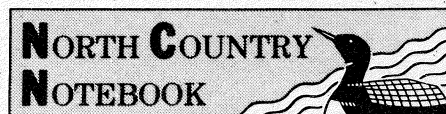
"I have a sign over my desk that quotes Izzy Stone: 'All governments are run by

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

"Why did Izzy 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 onto 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. Not to do so is irrational. But those who hold power 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: 'Politics is about the conflict between those who have been favored by fortune and those 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 very clear about which side he stood on in that struggle, and he wanted us to know which side he stood on.

"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 page 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 suppose 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."

The same could be said—without changing a single word—of I.F. Stone's spiritual son, Erwin Knoll, editor. ■

*George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Saturdays at 8:30 p.m. on Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA (970 AM).*