

David McGrath: Fighting the anti-media forces a task for real-life ‘Supermen’



Two columnists and a political cartoonist have left The Washington Post in protest to pro-Trump actions taken by the paper's owner, Jeff Bezos, seen in here in January. (Ruth Fremson/The New York Times)



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The trailer for the new “Superman” movie directed by James Gunn shows fictional newspaper reporter Lois Lane angering the Man of Steel by asking tough questions in an interview.

Her grit is what I liked about her TV and comic book character when I was a boy growing up in the 1960s — this, despite her puzzling inability to recognize Clark Kent as Superman when disguised in a suit and eyeglasses. Otherwise, she always did whatever was necessary, no matter the risk, to extract and write the truth for readers of the Daily Planet.

Later, in the 1970s, I found a real-life role model in Lawrence Ashe. He was a talented columnist for Tempo, the student newspaper of Chicago State University for which I was a writer in my junior and senior years. It's been a long time and I've lost track of Ashe, but I have never forgotten the 20-year-old's bravery.

After penning a column in which Ashe criticized the campus police for too much loafing in the cafeteria while neglecting areas around the buildings where students felt unsafe, one of the security guards came to the Tempo office to express his displeasure and demand that Ashe stop writing about them.

The following week, students and faculty were atwitter after reading Ashe's follow-up commentary, a satirical piece that would have made Jonathan Swift proud. Ashe imagined a hypothetical scenario in which the school's security force became like Haiti's notorious secret police, the Tonton Macoute, whose officers not only threatened newspaper reporters, but also assaulted, extorted and tortured innocent citizens.

Ashe's doubling down response to the security guard's attempt at intimidation led to a positive change as officers were henceforth noticeably absent from the cafeteria while more present in the school's trouble spots.

Today, while some newspapers and networks are kowtowing to pressure coming directly or filtering down from the Trump administration to stifle criticism, it is encouraging to see there are still plenty of Lawrence Ashe-types sticking up for freedom of the press and the sacred duty of the fourth estate to highlight truth and alert the public about what their elected representatives are up to.

Such as columnist Ruth Marcus, who quit The Washington Post after the paper killed a piece she wrote that was critical of the editorial restrictions owner Jeff Bezos had imposed to please the president.

She was the favorite of my wife's, partly because Marianne's mother's name was Ruth, but mostly for Marcus's enlightening commentaries on the U.S. Supreme Court.

My own favorite is Eugene Robinson, the syndicated columnist who also left the Post in opposition to Bezos' White House appeasement. I valued Eugene for utilitarian reasons, having passed out his columns year after year in my college

rhetoric classes to expose my students to Aristotelian logic and writing that was so clear, it glistened.

And when Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson tried to whitewash the Jan. 6 insurrection by falsely portraying those breaking and entering the U.S. Capitol building and assaulting police officers as innocent tourists and patriots, two of his Fox colleagues, journalists Stephen Hayes and Jonah Goldberg, called him out for his falsehoods and distortions before taking their leave.

As for network news, the “Lois Lane Award” goes to Bill Owens, executive producer of “60 Minutes.” As pressure built on Owens to go easier on the Trump administration since CBS brass was seeking a favorable ruling for a corporate merger from Trump’s FCC, Owens resigned rather than comply.

“60 Minutes” correspondent Scott Pelley subsequently and courageously praised Owens on air while slamming his bosses at CBS’ parent company Paramount for compromising journalistic standards.

Finally, one of the most inspiring chapters in the battle for freedom of the press unfolded after cartoonist Ann Telnaes quit when The Washington Post would not publish a cartoon mocking Bezos’s relationship with Trump, with caricatures of Bezos and other CEOs genuflecting in front of the president. Several weeks after her departure, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In her official citation, the Pulitzer committee referenced the “fearlessness that led to her departure from the news organization after 17 years.”

Lately, as the Trump administration threatens to defund National Public Radio while attacking The Associated Press, CNN and other news providers for what it considers anti-Trump bias when they report his lies or befuddling actions, commemorating the Fourth of July in 2025 is more important than ever. Especially as we move forward, and freedom of the press to uncover truth becomes a matter of life and death in the war involving Israel, Iran and now the U.S.

So let us celebrate intrepid journalists who continue the fight for the freedoms that our forefathers won 250 years ago, making possible the honest reporting of facts and the exchange of divergent opinions here and in all the other principled publications in the United States of America.

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