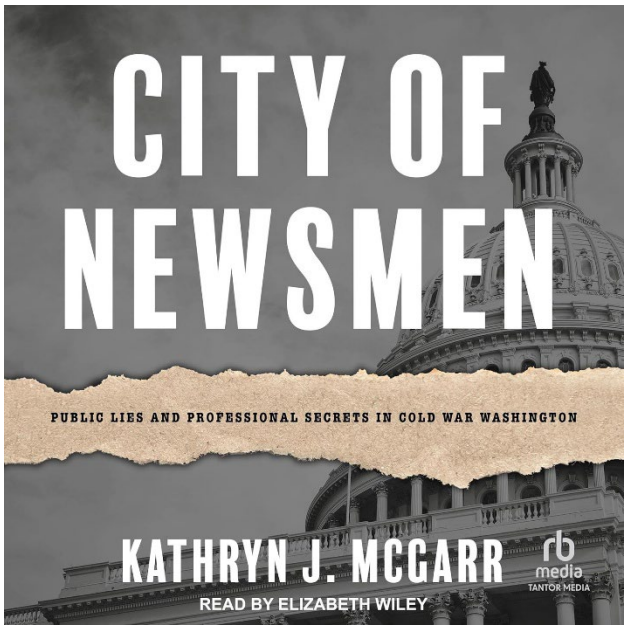
Journal of Military and Strategic Studies

VOLUME 24, ISSUE 1



Kathryn Mccarr Review of City of Newsmen

unabridgedUniversity of Chicago Press, 2022022666418X, 9780226664187

Dr. Clark Capshaw

Kathryn J. McGarr has written an engaging and compelling history of political reporting in *City of Newsmen: Public Lies and Professional Secrets in Cold War Washington*. While the book pairs meticulous scholarship with a lucid, inviting style, its title—especially the subtitle—leans toward sensationalism, likely aimed at broadening its appeal.

ISSN : 1488-559X

While themes of lies and secrecy are woven throughout, McGarr's key contribution lies in revealing the collegiality, self-regulation, and exclusivity that defined the relationships between Washington's national press corps and government officials during World War II and the early Cold War. She contends that these elite journalists were not misled by government propaganda, but rather were active participants in a mutually sustaining system built on secrecy, loyalty, and selective disclosure—driven by both patriotic duty and the practical need to maintain access to government sources essential to their professional standing.

The atmosphere was exclusive in that blacks, other minorities, and women were largely excluded from access to the inside story of what was going on behind the scenes in Washington, DC at the time, access was granted to the club members both through private news clubs and restricted access briefings and social affairs with top government officials.

Foremost among the press institutions were the Gridiron Club and the National Press Club, both of which excluded both women and black reporters. This exclusion, however, should not be seen as unique to journalism; rather, it reflected broader societal norms, and in many respects, the news profession may have been more progressive than other sectors of society at the time.

A revealing passage from the book illustrates the limited perspective of white, male reporters from this time, concerning reporting on anti-colonial movements:

> While white reporters often questioned their own objectivity, they did not interrogate their whiteness— perhaps a result of the wider society, which had yet to understand race or gender as cultural constructs. White reporters quite simply had more sympathy for Europeans and did not let anyone into their circle who might challenge that sympathy. (p. 189)

Another cultural consensus of the time was anticommunism. While most journalists accepted the fundamental premises of the Cold War, this acceptance was not always uncritical. Independent voices such as I.F. Stone, W.O. Walker, Ethel Payne, George Seldes, and others offered dissenting perspectives through alternative news outlets. Nevertheless, the New York Times (and to a lesser extent, the Washington Post), were

not only the authoritative news sources about U.S. government activities, they were also the "opinion leaders" in how to interpret that information.

It is instructive to compare this era of consensus-driven journalism with today's fragmented media landscape. While the national press of McGarr's period operated within a framework that often supported a bipartisan consensus—particularly on foreign policy—it also maintained a degree of professional integrity, even amid its flaws of exclusivity and selective reporting. This stands in stark contrast to contemporary outlets like Fox News and other conservative media, which have been criticized for disseminating deliberate falsehoods aligned with partisan agendas, particularly in support of the Trump administration. Whereas Cold War journalists sought, however imperfectly, to balance patriotic duty with journalistic responsibility, today's media climate reveals a deeper erosion of shared standards, with some outlets prioritizing ideological loyalty over factual accuracy.

In sum, *City of Newsmen* offers a compelling exploration of the complicated relationship between the press and power, challenging the myth of the independent, adversarial journalist in mid-century Washington. McGarr's work is not only a nuanced historical account but also a timely reflection on how media institutions shape—and are shaped by—the political environments they inhabit.

Dr. N. Clark Capshaw is an analyst for Emerging and Disruptive Technologies at NATO Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia. He holds a Ph.D. in Higher Education from Vanderbilt University, an M.S. in Aerospace Engineering from the University of Dayton, and an M.S. in Administration from Central Michigan University. Dr. Capshaw served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Gabon, Africa (1992–1994), where he taught mathematics, and later as an international volunteer with Habitat for Humanity in Indonesia (1998–2000). He is the author of The Promises and Pitfalls of Technology in Higher Education: A Vision of the 21st Century University, which examines the evolving role of technology in shaping educational institutions. He has also written accessible biographies of Nobel Peace Prize laureates Norman Borlaug and Muhammad Yunus, tailored for adolescent readers.