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Ben H. Bagdikian

JOURNALIST, MEDIA CRITIC, PROFESSOR AND DEAN EMERITUS

UC BERKELEY'S GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

Interviews conducted by
Lisa Rubens
in 2010

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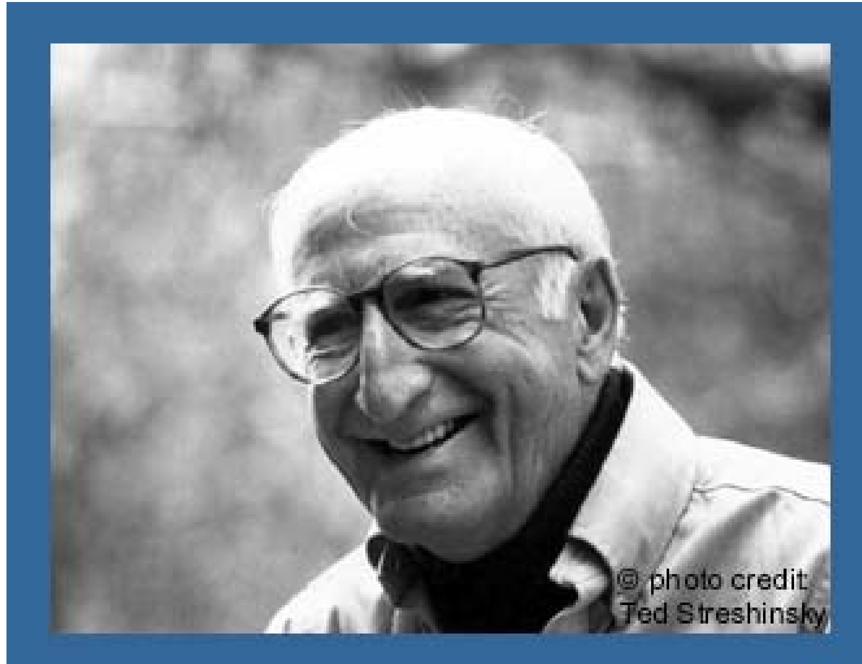
Ben Bagdikian, "BEN H. BAGDIKIAN: JOURNALIST, MEDIA CRITIC, PROFESSOR & DEAN EMERITUS, UC BERKELEY'S GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM," conducted by Lisa Rubens 2010, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2011.



Ben Bagdikian

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Interview History: Lisa Rubens

For more than a half-century Ben Bagdikian was the go-to person to get the straight story on civil rights, poverty and prisons, among a host of other social issues in the United States. He had long established his expertise in media criticism, but with his path-breaking book, *Media Monopoly* in 1983, he solidified his role as the pre-eminent critic in the field. A Google alert of his name continues to provide at least one or two notices every day.

Bagdikian's resume is broad and deep. He is first and foremost a working reporter who started at the *Providence Journal* in 1947. He retired as Dean Emeritus of UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism in 1990 and then continued to write and publish--opinion pieces, introductions to books on media and journalism, updates and revisions of his classic on the monopolization of media. Along the way he was part of a team that received a Pulitzer Prize for daily reporting, a columnist for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, a feature writer for many important magazines in the U.S. –including *Saturday Review* and *Time*- a fellow at the RAND Institute, and the author of six books. He has been the recipient of numerous prizes and, and a leading figure in organizations dedicated to freedom of the press. *Mother Jones* magazine sponsors an internship program in his name.

At 90, Bagdikian still keeps up with the daily national and international news; he compares the Wikileaks story to his own history-making role in publishing the Pentagon Papers, secret US government documents about the Vietnam War in 1971–which he narrates in the best cloak-and-dagger fashion. Students now working around the country call or e-mail to solicit his opinion for their own work.

Bagdikian is a passionate man, driven by his empathy for the human condition and tempered by his analytic capacity to understand the politics and economics that shape modern society. "I have always been an advocate for social justice," he explains. "My feeling is you make people feel what it's like to be in the disadvantaged part of the society." His effort is then substantiated by impeccable research. "My working philosophy and practice has always been read all the authoritative books, speak to the key people, and then live the life of the people you're describing." He brought this philosophy to life reporting about racism, after touring the south and living with a family of sharecroppers in Alabama in l957. Similarly, before he published his series and later book on prison abuse, he spent a week behind bars, under cover, in a Pennsylvania state correctional facility in 1972.

Ben Bagdikian is also a gentle and deeply moral soul, as is evident in reading this oral history. We conducted our interviews in the sunny living room of the Berkeley, California home he shares with his wife, Marlene Griffith. Arriving for each of the nine interview sessions, I noticed a different heap of magazines and books on the coffee table. Often we trudged up the stairs to his

study on the second floor, to search in his many file cabinets or look for books in which his work appears.

While his gait may be slowed and his hearing strained, his recall of what he learned about his Armenian family's escape from Turkey when he was three days old, of his youth straddling both an immigrant and Yankee culture, his years as an investigative reporter and then as managing editor of and ombudsman for *The Washington Post* are particularly vivid. The stories tumble out, laced with recapitulations of dialog between himself and key people that figure in his narrative. And then come the observations filled with nuggets of information and followed by an analytic summary.

We covered a lot of substantive ground in this interview, including: the effect of technology on the newspaper business; the decline of local reporting; the palpable tensions at a great metropolitan daily; the time-consuming process of rigorous research and teaching at and serving as dean for arguably the best school of journalism in the country. Hopefully these interviews will encourage a general audience and particularly students of 20th century journalism to read his key works and selections from his hundreds and hundreds of articles.

Above all, these interviews tell the story of a principled working reporter who rose to the highest levels of his chosen profession by doing his job well, every day, and pushing his profession to fulfill its role as a pillar of a democratic society, accurately reflecting its flaws, and stimulating correction and reform.

Bagdikian's papers, with an itemized shelf list, are located at his undergraduate alma mater, Clark University

A tribute to Bagdikian upon retiring from Berkeley's School of Journalism can be found at: http://journalism.berkeley.edu/resources/history/ [*North Gate News*, February 1990]

Selections from an interview with Frontline about *Media Monopoly* can be found at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/smoke/interviews/bagdikian1.html

See also, Ben Bagdikian, *Double Vision: Reflections on My Heritage, Life and Profession*, Beacon Press 1995, which chronicles some of the episodes in this oral history.

Interview #1: May 18, 2010
Begin Audio File 1

01-00:00:00
Rubens: Good afternoon, Ben. It's May 18, 2010 and we're beginning your oral history.

01-00:00:06
Bagdikian: I'd like to begin perhaps before the beginning because it conditioned what happened to me at the moment of my birth. My family, for many years, maybe generations, had lived in southeastern Turkey, in Anatolia, in a city called Marash, in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. The family compound, the basic one, was in Marash. But the family spent most of their time in Tarsus where my father was a professor in an American school there, which had been established by the Congregationalist Church. The Congregationalists were Protestants and were a very large influence within the culture in Turkey, which was anti-Armenian. But after World War I, in which Turkey was on the losing side, where my family lived was occupied by the British and later the French.

But during most of that time they lived in a college compound in Tarsus where my father was a professor of chemistry and planned to come to the United States and go to Harvard Medical School. But every time he told the president of the college, Dr. Christie, that he was ready to go, Dr. Christie would raise his pay and he would stay. My mother's family also lived in Marash where their family was based, but, of course, she was with my father and my sisters in Tarsus. My mother's family had money. My father's family were peasants but when he was five years old he found out that the Congregationalists had started a high school and college where you could get a free education. He went and graduated from the college there. He did his graduate work at American University in Lebanon, came back and went back to Tarsus where the family was. It was a very happy time.

01-00:03:21
Rubens: What was your father's name?

01-00:03:22
Bagdikian: His name was Aram Toros Bagdikian. And then he changed it. Toros is transliterated to Theodore. So it was Aram Theodore Bagdikian. And my mother was a Uvezian. They had money because their family controlled a part of the long series of goods that were brought by both camel abd horses from the Far East with all of the goods, the higher level jewelry and spices and so forth, from the Indian Ocean. It came in a series of people who had contracts for each part of this transportation,. and my mother's family controlled the part from Syria to the other border of Turkey. So they had money.

01-00:04:49
Rubens: What was your mother's name?

01-00:04:51
Bagdikian: Her name was Daisy Uvezian. Her mother was a formidable woman, my grandmother. The only two people she ever was really nice to was her husband and me. But she was against the marriage because my father was a simple professor and would never make a lot of money.

01-00:05:11
Rubens: How had they met?

01-00:05:14
Bagdikian: Well, they had gone to the high school and college together and even though my grandmother was against the marriage because my father really wasn't rich as they were, my mother's father liked my father. And later on, when he was a pastor in this country, I learned that he was a very dashing handsome young man and that what used to outrage my grandmother was my father, after he became a fairly affluent man, had a stable of horses, and he had a black stallion. And he would come galloping, jump over the wall of my mother's family compound—because families had walls around their houses—sweep up my mother on the saddle and they'd go riding off into the fields. My grandmother was outraged but my grandfather thought that was wonderful.

01-00:06:33
Rubens: He was a romantic.

01-00:06:37
Bagdikian: And so they did get married.

01-00:06:41
Rubens: Do you know what year they married? Because when you were born there were quite a few older siblings in the family.

01-00:06:47
Bagdikian: I had four older sisters. My father and mother were married in Marash in—

01-00:07:12
Rubens: Must have been after the turn of the twentieth century.

01-00:07:15
Bagdikian: Yes, it would have been because he was born in 1884 and she in 1886.

01-00:07:27
Rubens: You were born in 1920. Your oldest sister at that time was—

01-00:07:37
Bagdikian: Tirzah. And Tirzah was born in 1911. They must have practiced birth control because the girls came regularly two years apart. So Tirzah was the oldest of them, then Lydia, Cynthia and Nora. My mother named Nora because she read a lot of books and she'd read an Irish novel where the heroine was Nora. They wanted a boy. And the single lapse I know of in the literary taste of my mother was she had read the novel *Ben-Hur* by Edgar Lew Wallace. It's a

terrible book but the hero is Ben-Hur. And they wanted a son. The maids would go to the hospital when she was pregnant, ready to deliver. She'd send the maid over. "Tell us when they're ready to deliver," and they'd go over. They'd come back. "It's a daughter." Well, they were pleased with a daughter but they wanted a son. So then the second time she had a baby and it was another daughter. And after a while the maid didn't want to go over because they were afraid it'd be another daughter and they'd be a disappointment. And it was another daughter, my third sister. And then there was yet a fourth daughter. Then, finally, when I was born, by that time it was the last gap of the Genocide—the main part of the genocide was 1915, 1916 but they continued to be attacking Armenians whenever they could, despite the British and the French who were trying to prevent that.

01-00:09:59
Rubens: This is the Turks who are attacking the Armenians.

01-00:10:02
Bagdikian: Yes. And so when I was being delivered, the Turks were again fighting Armenians. The French at that time displaced the British who were occupying Turkey. In fact, the French had made a secret pact in Paris with the new president of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal, that if Kemal could show that he controlled the country, the French and they could have commercial operations that would be very profitable. So the French became very lax in keeping the Armenians safe. The general of the French stayed in our family compound and he was a weak man but not a bad man. This was in Marash.

01-00:11:28
Rubens: This compound was your mother's family?

01-00:11:28
Bagdikian: Yes. So finally she was pregnant and after four girls it was going to be a boy. But I was born after the beginning of the Turkish rebellion against the French. The French had patrolled the city with the Turkish police and at a signal the Turkish police killed their French partners and began the massacre of the Armenians. At that point I was born.

01-00:12:14
Rubens: Had the family considered leaving during World War I? You had said they had thought at different times that they would leave.

01-00:12:21
Bagdikian: No. I was born in 1920. That was after the war. But I began my life with a kind of bang. During my mother's delivery of me, a bullet hit over her head and that's how I began life, because I was being born at that moment.

01-00:12:45
Rubens: These were Turkish bullets that were attacking—

01-00:12:52
Bagdikian: The Armenian population. Trying to get them out finally because of this French collusion with the Turkish authorities. And so I was born and at that time the Turks started killing Armenians, burning their churches and the French general received a cable saying that they were to leave the city and that would mean there would be no foreign protection for Armenians. He showed the cable to my father, because he was living in our compound, saying, "You must not tell anybody about this." And my father said, "I'll tell everybody about it because the Turks are going to kill all the Armenians if the French let them." And so he said to call the leaders of the Armenian community, "Tell them that the French are leaving, that there is going to be another massacre and I am taking my family and we are going to leave and try to escape over the mountains." The escape would have to go over mountains in which the snow was very deep, the temperatures were below zero. My mother was still weak and my father's horse, which he named Paganini, was shot out from underneath him. But my mother continued to ride her horse she named Mozart and we started abandoning the city as the city began to be burned. Some Armenians took refuge in the churches and they all died because the Turks set fire to the churches. And my sisters remember coming out as they crossed a bridge over a river. And my sister Lydia remembers looking back and seeing the churches burning and people screaming inside. And we started this long trek over the snow covered mountains. People, including the French soldiers, were dying, freezing to death in the snow. My mother was riding her horse.

I was eleven days old when we took to the mountains. And my mother was very weak and she asked my father to carry me. She had stuffed my sister's pockets with zwieback [toast] to try to get food during the escape over the mountains. And I, of course, had just been born.

01-00:16:21
Rubens: This was just your immediate family that was escaping? Her parents remained back at the family home? Was anyone leading you across the mountains?

01-00:16:34
Bagdikian: There were the French soldiers and some Armenians. They were unable to take anything from there except what they could pack in the last minute, things like zwieback and food. My mother had been carrying me but she felt very weak, so my father was carrying me and he ran back and forth keeping the girls together, my four sisters, and then we would stop periodically at night to maybe build a fire and warm and eat some of the food. All around there were people dying in the snow. My sisters remember seeing body after body after body frozen to death. And my father was carrying me and he would melt snow to give me for water. And then there was a point in which I seemed not to respond. And he was afraid I had frozen to death. But this was his bundle. He thought this was not the time to tell the family that the baby was dead, and so he did not. And as he was keeping the rest of the family together, my mother on her horse started fainting. So he dropped this bundle to catch

her and when I hit the ground I cried, so I was not dead, and that's when, in a sense, I was saved. It took five days to get over these mountains.

01-00:18:35
Rubens: Were you part of a larger party? Was this a large exodus out of Marash or were you just with your family?

01-00:18:44
Bagdikian: No, hundreds, including the French troops. And thousands ultimately, as a matter of fact, because afterwards Marlene [Griffith] and I, my wife and I, went to the French records just outside of Paris and there are the original documents that my father saw and that the general saw and the report, and it was something like twenty below zero Fahrenheit and so a lot of those were confirmed by the official records.

And each night, we would settle. My sisters remembered that we would try to start a fire and we would have whatever food we had, but first we would say the Lord's Prayer, followed by the Twenty-Third Psalm and then try to sleep, but not very long. My father was most of the time going back and forth, back and forth, making sure all the girls were safe—because it was very hard to go in a group. You went as fast as you could in the deep snow. One night they found a cabin that had goat in them, so they could slaughter the goat and they could have some meat over a fire. And that was about the only real food they had.

01-00:20:38
Rubens: What was their goal? Where were they trying to get to?

01-00:20:41
Bagdikian: They were trying to get to a rail head that was controlled by the French and that therefore would be safe and they eventually got to that rail head, except that my youngest of the older sisters wasn't there. And the French officer said, "Your family is the only one who could join the soldiers on this train about to leave," the train with the French Army. And my mother said, "We can't get on the train because one of my daughters is missing." And the French officer said, "But Madam, this is your only chance. There will not be another train." She said, "I'm not leaving without my daughter." And then one of the refugee young girls came and had Nora's scarf on and everybody thought that Nora must have been frozen and someone stole her clothes, because people took clothes off the dead bodies because it didn't do the dead bodies any good. At the very last minute, as the train was about to pull off, my sister Nora appeared without any clothes on and finally they got on the train. Lydia fainted because both she and my oldest sister had frostbite and their toes had frozen. And the train got out of that area of the fighting to a city called Mersin on the coast where there was a hospital whose head had been a former student of my father's. The girls had to have their toes operated on without anesthesia and they described it as the most painful thing they'd ever experienced. Lydia was so much in pain. She said, "You have to stop. Stop, stop." And my

mother would say, “Dear, they have to do that.” And my sister said, “There’s such pain. If there were a God he would stop it. I hate God.” And my mother told her, “God will forgive you. Don’t worry. It will be all right.” They had finished that operation.

My father then had to leave them because he wanted to report to the British Commissioner, with whom he was friendly and he knew he could trust, to tell him what was going on because the European papers didn’t know that, what was happening. So he went to Istanbul—he knew the family was safe in that hospital—and told the British Commissioner what was going on and then the British Commissioner said, “Professor, you’ve got to get word to your family down in Mersin,” which was a French area, “because the French have ordered your family’s arrest because you gave a press conference saying that the French were just as responsible as the Turks for letting this happen in a massacre.” And so he had to get a message down to the hospital in the French territory. And he met a man, a Turk, whom he had done great favors for and had been very good to. And the man said, “Professor, I need a pass to get back down to Turkey to my family, find out what’s happening, but I can’t get one. Can you get one?” And my father said, “I will get you a pass if you will get word to my family to come back up.” So he went to the British Consulate, got a pass for this Turk, said, “I’m trusting you to tell my family they should come up here immediately.” And he went every day to the Galata Bridge, the main bridge in Istanbul, which is next to the pier where boats from the south come in to the city. And he would come every day to look to see if the family was in one of those boats. And one day they were. And we have a watercolor in our dining room that shows the Galata Bridge where the family was united. And they stayed in a house, a friend’s house, because Constantinople or Istanbul was an international city, still, until they recovered. And then they remembered that it was a very pleasant three or four months in Greece.

Then we finally got on a boat, the Susquehanna. The girls had practiced spelling and saying Susquehanna because they knew that was the boat they were going to get on. And the boat never could come right next to land but there was a smaller boat that would take them out to where the larger steamer was. As they were going on this sort of gangplank to connect to the larger boat, as they were handing me over, one of the men on the crew dropped me into the water and my sisters argued, I remember all through my childhood, which one of them picked me out of the water. But they did. Someone picked me up and we got on the boat.

01-00:27:50
Rubens: Was this boat bound for the United States?

01-00:27:52
Bagdikian: Bound for the United States. The Susquehanna. I have upstairs the manifest from Ellis Island that shows the family. And on the boat, the first class passengers, when they got to Ellis Island, would go on directly to New York,

not Ellis Island; but the people in steerage, which is the way we came because my father had spent all his money. He divided what money he had when we got on the French train to leave between Semma the maid who had come with us and a young boy who had helped carry Nora. My father gave his horse to him as a reward. And when we got to New York, to Ellis Island, if you came by steerage, you had to have an advocate in the United States to land. First class passengers didn't but steerage passengers did. And the man who had been a top student of my father's at the college had a good job with General Electric and he was supposed to have met us as our advocate. He didn't appear. If your advocate didn't appear, they would send you back where you had been. But my father had made very good friends with the ship's surgeon, because the surgeon noticed my father teaching my sisters how to walk again after their toe operations and he and they became good friends. And when this ex-student didn't appear, the doctor said, "I'll be your advocate." So this doctor, whose name I have, came. He got his MD at the University of Kentucky, became our advocate, and I have written to the University to try to find out the background of this man. They never answered. So we finally landed in New York after this doctor was our advocate, came to our rescue. And as soon as we landed, my mother said, "Everybody, we are now in America and we are going to have apple pie." So they bought apple pie for everybody but—

01-00:31:04
Rubens: Where did they think that they were going to settle this family? You pointed to the fact that the servants went off on their own.

01-00:31:13
Bagdikian: There were friends and Armenians in New York and they would locate them because my father was well-known among them.

01-00:31:24
Rubens: And I assume both your mother and father spoke English very well?

01-00:31:29
Bagdikian: Oh, yes. English was the household language in Turkey because my father was teaching in an American school. The whole family knew English and they knew English without an accent. But two weeks after we landed in New York my mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis. That meant that she had to go to a hospital and be put in isolation immediately. The treatment at that time for tuberculosis was high altitudes. So she went in to Brigham Hospital to begin with, where she was diagnosed, and then my father, assuming there would be a long recovery and that altitude was good for it—there were a lot of Congregationalist Armenians in the Boston area. They had, in the meantime, asked him to be their pastor. Well, he hadn't planned to be a preacher but he agreed. But my mother had to go to a sanitarium.

01-00:32:51
Rubens: This was for a Congregationalist denomination?

01-00:32:56
Bagdikian: Yes. There are a lot of Armenian Congregationalists in Boston and they had a large church in Cambridge and he said, "Yes, he'd be their pastor." He took a few courses in Harvard Theological Seminary and was ordained.

01-00:33:17
Rubens: And your mother in the meantime—

01-00:33:19
Bagdikian: In the meantime, my mother, having been diagnosed with tuberculosis, had to go to a sanitarium and it would be in Massachusetts. And so my father, would have to commute from whatever towns had high altitude. He picked a town named Stoneham, Massachusetts. The altitude was 161 feet. So he bought a house in Stoneham. But my mother, of course, had to go to the sanitarium and my father had to take trolleys and buses to go to the sanitariums where she was. And she was a poet and wrote lots of poetry and they would visit her in the sanitarium. They would have to take a trolley and elevators and then the train to get to one of these central Massachusetts sanitariums. And in the meantime, of course, I had to be taken care of and my father would have to be both father and mother.

01-00:34:52
Rubens: How come he didn't keep the servants who had come with you?

01-00:34:56
Bagdikian: The servants did not come with us to America. So we first settled in a place called Brighton near Watertown, where there are a lot of Armenians who had come from Turkey, and our part of Turkey, and they knew about him.

01-00:35:17
Rubens: He figured he could hire someone from that community to help with the family?

01-00:35:24
Bagdikian: He did when we were in Watertown. But when he bought this house in Stoneham, that would permit him to have public transportation to his church in Cambridge, while at the same time we'd have high altitude, which was a measly 161 feet. It ended up being the town I grew up in, Stoneham, Massachusetts. The other possibility was on the other side of Boston. Anyway, that is the town I grew up in.

01-00:36:02
Rubens: Did he hire servants from that community to help? It would have been difficult to manage five children and also—

01-00:36:10
Bagdikian: My sisters were the ones who took care of me. But they spent a lot of time visiting the sanitarium where my mother was. And they took me with them. During that period there were two or three occasions when they thought she might be recovering and was permitted to visit in the house. I have a vague

memory of sitting next to a woman who was very pale and wore a gray dress. That was my memory of my mother. And then the doctors called and said she has to return right away, the tests don't look good. And I remember two men leading her down our front walk in Stoneham to my uncle's car.

01-00:37:18
Rubens: This is a memory from when you are three years old?

01-00:37:23
Bagdikian: I would have been three years old at that point. I was in her hospital room in the sanitarium and at a point when she knew that she was going to die and she asked the family to come one last time and they would pray inside and at some point asked me to leave the room. Apparently she was telling them about her dying and her final words to them. And they said she said, "Take care of Ben-Hur. He's a very special baby." And I remember waiting outside that room and some visitor to the sanitarium gave me a penny. To this day, I still have a vivid memory of this copper shiny penny with Abraham Lincoln on it and that's the memory I have of that sanitarium.

01-00:38:37
Rubens: So you never really knew your mother?

01-00:38:45
Bagdikian: Not in a very real way, except remembering this again.

01-00:38:52
Rubens: And who is telling you these stories? How is it that the story of the exodus from Turkey and the arrival in New York, all of this is so vivid in your description? Do you grow up hearing these stories over and over?

01-00:39:08
Bagdikian: It came from my sisters. Not all together from my father, because a year after my mother died he remarried and he remarried a woman who was perhaps the opposite of my mother. For example, all the pictures of my mother disappeared. My sisters kept saying, "Papa, where is the pictures of mother?" He always just sort of shrugged and didn't say anything.

01-00:39:57
Rubens: Was your stepmother an Armenian immigrant, as well?

01-00:40:02
Bagdikian: Yes, she was Armenian but she had had a terrible history. She and her sister lived in a part of Marash at some distance from us. No, they lived near Syria. And she insisted that my mother's pictures shouldn't be shown. And my sisters would ask my father and he would not be very responsive.

01-00:40:44
Rubens: Did she bring children into the household? Had she been married before?

01-00:40:50
Bagdikian: No, she hadn't, but she had had a terrible experience. When they were still in Turkey and the Turks were coming to their house, her parents told her and her sister to hide in a mulberry tree where they couldn't be seen. Mulberry tree has the flowing branches where you could hide. And they watched while the Turks massacred their parents and they stayed there four days before some people from an English orphanage came and found them. And so she was brought up in English orphanage where they were very strict and rather rigid. And she tended to be that way from that experience. So while it was never a warm feeling after that, it was civilized. We always had dinner together. And when she wasn't present, my sisters would say, "Where's the picture of Mother?" So it was a complete change. Much harder for them, because I had no memory of what it was like before.

So I grew up in this town on the outskirts of Boston. My father and I always had respect for each other. My stepmother would insist that I would be beaten for some transgression and she would describe exactly how I should be spanked. But my father would take me outside and simply say, "Don't do that again." And he never touched me that way. And we had a kind of mutual respect for each other but not an intimate one. He was a genius at growing things. And also he had his congregation. He knew Armenian, Turkish, Arabic. He learned the Biblical languages. But I grew up in this Yankee town near Boston. So when my mother's younger brother, Fred Uvezian, came to this country, he became the warmest personality in my life.

01-00:43:43
Rubens: When was this? How old were you when he immigrated?

01-00:43:46
Bagdikian: I would guess that I was five or six. But I remember he lived with us until my stepmother joined the household. And he would come and he would bring gifts. For example, he got me my first baby shoes. He worked in a very tough part of Charlestown, Massachusetts, which is near the federal prison and the dockyards and he went to a shoe store and said, "Listen, I have a nephew and his foot goes from here to here." And he held out his hand. And he got me my first baby shoes. He became the closest man in my life. And I was holding that same hand that got those baby shoes eighty-four years later as he lay dying and I held his hand while he was dying. He saw us regularly. He was a wonderful man. He knew all kinds of stories and songs. He had a beautiful voice.

01-00:45:02
Rubens: Is he the one who goes to Montana?

01-00:45:57
Bagdikian: Yes. My maternal step-grandfather knew horses, so he and my grandmother had a ranch in Montana. My grandmother came to this country in the 1920s and my uncle Fred was with her. And my step-grandfather, who later became

very close to me, too, had the ranch in Montana. And he wrote and said, "Listen, why don't you and your son come to the ranch and if we like each other then maybe we'll get married." And they did. They got married.

And then they moved to Rochester, New York. Why Rochester, I'm not sure. And when I was nine years old, it was during the Depression, I visited them in Rochester. And I remember I had a hunger for chocolate. Used to have in the stores. They used to have glass cabinets filled with these big chunks of chocolate and I used to have dreams about them. So I dreamt a lot about chocolate and girls. They moved to Rochester, New York, and I spent my ninth summer there, when I was nine years old. And the first thing I saw when I walked in my grandmother's store—they had bought two stores—was a cabinet full of chocolate. And I stared at it. She obviously saw that I was in awe. She said, "Eat, my son. Take all you want." And I ate chocolate for one week. After a week I didn't want to see another piece of chocolate. But I had a very good summer there and I got to know my step-grandfather and he was a very special kind of man, too. He was filled with joy and fun, just the way my uncle was, and I remember they took me to Niagara Falls when I was visiting in Rochester. And when my grandmother saw Niagara Falls. They used to have a cable car that went right over the Falls. And my grandfather said, "Margaret, why don't we take this cable car." She said, "Oh, I can't even look at it. I can't even look at it." And she walked away. It was such a frightening view. And it was, this cable car over the Great Falls. And as she walked away, my grandfather gestured to me, "Come with me." And we went in, we got on the cable car, and just after it left he called out, "Margaret." And she turned around and she was horrified. There were the two of us going over the Fall. And I remember that. He was a very special kind of man.

01-00:50:33
Rubens: It was his grandchild who had watched her parents being killed.

01-00:50:43
Bagdikian: Yes. He was her step-grandfather. When I visited him when I was nine years old and stayed with him, he thought I was too thin and that it was this preacher's boy who wasn't husky enough. So first of all, we'd have a huge breakfast and then my grandmother said, "Would you like some more?" And I would say, "No, thank you." And my grandfather would say, "What's this no thank you? You got to eat." And he took a glass of water and he splashed it over my head. My grandmother rebuked him and scolded him, took me inside, changed my clothes, and my grandfather said, "That was just a joke, my boy. Will you have some more eggs?" "No, thank you." "Want another glass of water?" My grandmother, maternal grandmother, was a formidable woman, six foot tall and the only people that she treated nicely was her husband and me. Otherwise—

01-00:52:15
Rubens: And where did they live?

01-00:52:18
Bagdikian: They lived in Rochester and then when the Depression came they had two stores and they were prosperous. But the Depression ended their ownership and they had to move to a very tough area of Boston in Brighton, Mass. But I would visit them summers.

01-00:52:43
Rubens: Let me ask you some general questions about your youth. Did you feel yourself an immigrant? You talked about being raised in this Yankee community and at the same time you have a large Armenian family, especially these immigrant grandparents that you loved and visited. Did you straddle two worlds?

01-00:53:10
Bagdikian: The town I lived in was a Yankee town and by that I mean the most eminent citizens, families in this town, 10,000 population but a suburb of Boston, were Anglo-Saxon. There was a lot of talk about the foreigners. Foreigners were anybody who couldn't trace their family back to the Mayflower or at least England. The Irish were foreigners. The Armenians were foreigners. The Italians were foreigners. But there was a lot of talk about foreigners among that kind of family. So I grew up with that sense that foreigners had a separate kind of status, certainly in that town, and I think most of New England.

01-00:54:20
Rubens: The schools you went to, you weren't the only Armenian there, though?

01-00:54:27
Bagdikian: There were two or three other Armenians in that town and we knew them. And I knew the kids who went to the school there. I was very lucky in a way. It was fairly clear to the mothers of my best friends that my stepmother was a rather strict and unforgiving person. And the mothers of three of my best playmates were a wonderful escape for me. They were warm and we were friends all through high school.

01-00:55:20
Rubens: Were these Armenian families or not?

01-00:55:22
Bagdikian: No. There were some Armenian families. We knew them. But they lived in another part of town. The mothers of my friends, one of them took me on vacation with their son because we were good friends. Another one I still correspond with. He lives now in Long Beach. And so there were very good friends and I enjoyed that part of it very much. And I, of course, would fall in love with girls and I used to dream about girls and chocolate.

01-00:56:19
Rubens: How about attending church? Was your father pretty strict about your religious upbringing?

01-00:56:26
Bagdikian: I had to go to his church most of the time but he preached in Turkish except for Children's Day, when he'd give a short sermon in Turkish, another one in Armenian and a third one in English. And I'd have to go.

01-00:56:46
Rubens: And did you know Turkish and Armenian?

01-00:56:52
Bagdikian: Not really. But other times I would go to the Congregational church in the town we lived in. And then later on to the Unitarian church and I became very active as an adult in the Unitarian church.

01-00:57:11
Rubens: So let me stop now. I've got to change the tape.

[End Audio File 1]

[Begin Audio File 2]

02-00:00:06
Bagdikian: I told you that when my stepmother came into the family, all pictures of my mother and father disappeared, the early pictures. No matter what my sisters said, nobody said anything. And when I would have a transgression, I forgot to pick up my father's laundry from the laundry and things of that sort. Once I used my knowledge of chemistry to try to blow up some dam at a brook My punishment was to spend hours in my father's study, which was filled with theological books and philosophy books and nothing very interesting. And I'd poke around. And one day I was poking around in his bookshelf and I saw a book by Emmanuel Kant, *Heaven and Hell*, and I pulled it out, opened it up and there was the missing wedding picture of my mother and father. And he had hidden it there. So he was, in a way, living a secret repressed life.

02-00:01:27
Rubens: Well, here he had been a scientist teaching chemistry and now he was a pastor. He had had aspirations of being a doctor. It does seem like a—

02-00:01:35
Bagdikian: Well, he'd been educated by these Congregationalist teachers in Turkey and he took divinity courses at Harvard and became a doctor of theology and he became a minister.

02-00:01:59
Rubens: But when you say he led a secret life, I was thinking a repressed life. He may not have expected he would have ended up a pastor.

02-00:02:10
Bagdikian: He spent so much time with his Armenian congregation. He would visit them regularly, that he never got much involved in the non-Armenian part of the community. My sisters, of course, were very much involved. They had

boyfriends and we went to the football games. So in that sense we lived a regular American life outside the house. Inside, well, we had an interesting arrangement. We had a large living room, dining room table, and at a time when my four sisters were still unmarried and living at home, we'd have dinner. We'd say a prayer before dinner. My father would have a long Bible reading afterward, and then afterward we would bait my father on the Bible and ask him about contradictions in the Bible. He liked that. He'd say, "Yes, there are contradictions." And then he would go into varied discussions about it. You had to be very careful because he didn't permit swearing. So my sister Nora, who was the family rebel and jokester, said, "Papa, I have a question I bet you can't answer." And my father said, "What is it?" She said, "In the Bible who had the most delicate skin?" My father said, "What do you mean, delicate skin?" "Who was this?" She said, "It was Absalom. It said in the Bible he tied his ass to the tree and walked three miles into the wilderness." My father gasped, put his hands in front of his face and then he let a smile sort of creep out. And we would bait my father every night on the Bible and sometimes we'd get into politics. He was a great admirer of Franklin Roosevelt. My sisters tended to be more Republican but my father was a Democrat.

02-00:04:55
Rubens: Do you remember the Depression having an impact on your own family life? Do you remember the Roosevelt years, for instance did you listen to the Fireside Chats as a family?

02-00:05:17
Bagdikian: Oh, yes. We would listen to his talks every week and my father once wrote a letter to Franklin Roosevelt which was reproduced. He was objecting to the Greek and Turkish aid program. So that, in that sense, he was involved in the politics. But not in the politics the way the rest of the family was.

02-00:06:01
Rubens: Because you became a newspaper man, do you have any memory of newspapers in the household?

02-00:06:10
Bagdikian: He took the Boston *Traveler*, which doesn't exist anymore. But once every couple of weeks he would go shopping at the wholesale markets at Faneuil Hall in Boston and we'd go back home with big bags of meat and vegetables and so forth because the local stuff in the A&P and the local stores was not high enough quality for him. He wanted it from the big wholesale places and Faneuil Hall was always a big crowded place with people selling. Ten booths would sell meat and others vegetables. And he would back with four—he was an immensely strong man—with four or five bags and when I went with him I'd have to carry the bags. We lived on a slight hill on Elm Street. And he would walk very fast and I'd have to work very hard to keep up with him. He loved to cook and my stepmother liked to cook with him. And that was a kind of bond between them.

02-00:07:32
Rubens: Did your stepmother and father have children together?

02-00:07:47
Bagdikian: Yes. I had two half brothers. She used to feel that somehow my sisters favored me more than my stepbrother and she would sometimes try to pit one of my stepbrothers and me together. But the fact was we were the closest of friends and the older of her two children, Ted, was a close friend from the time we were little kids. If he was crying as a child, they went to him, they couldn't understand what he was saying. He'd say, "I want Ben. I want Ben." And then when he got older, we kept in touch and he had all kinds of illnesses and operations. I remember once I was giving a talk to a conference in Atlantic City. It was a big conference and I was speaking. And I got word my brother was in Jamaica Hospital, very ill, maybe on the critical list. So I left immediately, went to Jamaica. Terrible hospital. I went in there and these tubes coming out of everywhere. His mother was hysterical and I saw that he was going into a state of shock. And the nurse and doctors were eating potato chips. I remember going in and sweeping off the potato chips. I said, "My brother's going in a state of shock. Come in." And he didn't. Ted and I stayed friends for life. Once he sowed his wild oats in New York, which he did, he earned his way through Manhattan School of Music by playing piano in a Mafioso's dive.

02-00:10:03
Rubens: So having had four girls, then your father went on to have three boys?

02-00:10:09
Bagdikian: Me and the two half brothers.

02-00:10:13
Rubens: Yes, yes. So that was a pretty full household. Did the Depression affect your father's income or did he seem to sail through the Depression pretty well?

02-00:10:24
Bagdikian: Well, he always had a huge garden and it really was productive. One of my great regrets— He'd try to show me how he could interbreed trees, dahlias, flowers, and his parishioners would bring him plants that were dying so he could make them grow and he was really very, very skilled at all of that. We used to say it was his peasant upbringing.

02-00:11:07
Rubens: But he certainly was no peasant. I wanted you to just comment on did he pay attention to national news or international news. You talked about that one letter that he wrote to Roosevelt. But in terms of journals being around the house?

02-00:11:25
Bagdikian: Well, when he'd take me into Boston with him, there were seven Boston newspapers and there was a place on Tremont Street where all the newspapers at that time had their offices and it was before popular radio, no TV, and the

newspapers would have in their plate glass windows facing the street a blackboard and their man would always be writing. "The Red Sox are four and the Yankees are two. And the stock market closed at such and such a time." And they would write on the blackboard and the people would come and see what the latest bulletins were.

02-00:12:08
Rubens: So you have a vivid memory of that?

02-00:12:10
Bagdikian: Oh, yes.

02-00:12:11
Rubens: Not necessarily your father bringing in news or talking to you about news?

02-00:12:17
Bagdikian: Well, we'd talk a little bit about international news, but not so much domestic news. He would get the paper every day. And in the town there were two weekly newspapers and they'd tell something about the nature of immigrants versus natives. One paper was Catholic and one was Protestant. These were the two weekly papers in town and you could tell by which paper they took whether they were Catholic or Protestant. There was lots of prejudice against Catholics and against immigrants but it didn't affect boyhood life.

02-00:13:13
Rubens: Let's get you into high school, because I think you're going to be the editor of the school newspaper, aren't you?

02-00:13:21
Bagdikian: Well, no. I made a newspaper just once but journalism wasn't something I thought of. I didn't work on the paper. Not until I got in college. I ran cross country at high school

02-00:13:56
Rubens: All right. So do you want to say anything specifically about high school? Were you a good student?

02-00:14:02
Bagdikian: I was a pretty lazy student. For example, I would do a lot of the homework. It wasn't a very demanding high school. I would do a lot of the homework before class, before the teacher came in, and I got by. But I didn't study at night at home.

02-00:14:31
Rubens: Was it just presumed that you would go to college?

02-00:14:34
Bagdikian: It was just assumed that I would.

02-00:14:35
Rubens: Did any of the girls go to college?

02-00:14:39
Bagdikian: Tirzah went to Mass General and became a nurse, a very good surgical nurse. The next one, Lydia, wanted to do that but it was during the Depression. My father said, "You really ought to go to commercial high school because you can get a job as a stenographer." And she did get a job as stenographer in a local high school. She ended up practically running the school system because she's smart. She made up the budgets. And in New England, the ruling town body are called selectmen. They're like the town council. She would present the budget to them. Cynthia was my father's favorite. She went to Radcliff but she got a full scholarship there. And Nora was the most popular girl in town and she didn't go to college. She took a course in beautician's work. But she could make jokes with the faculty and get away with it because she was an outrageous but funny jokester. And she ended up living in Ellsworth, Maine, and opened up a beautician shop that became the one that all the rich people went to because she was very good at it.

My sisters had their own social life and I had the normal teenage interest in girls and I had two or three girls I was always trying to neck with.

02-00:16:55
Rubens: Did you have a car? Was there a family automobile at some point?

02-00:17:03
Bagdikian: Yes. My father finally got a car and he had this terrible habit of finding cars that had beautiful shiny bodies and junk under the hood.

02-00:17:18
Rubens: He repeatedly bought used cars?

02-00:17:21
Bagdikian: Well, he had one new car. The others were used but very shiny but with rotten engines. And as a former science person, you'd think he'd be interested, but he wasn't. Uncle Fred was a master mechanic. He lived in Dedham on the opposite side of Boston. And I would go with Uncle Fred and we would overhaul my father's junk heaps.

02-00:17:51
Rubens: So you learned to drive and had access to the car?

02-00:17:55
Bagdikian: Oh, yes. Well, I drove before I was sixteen but the importance of sixteen in my life was that's when you could get an automobile license in Massachusetts. In school I took a lot of ragging because my name was Ben-Hur and in school my teacher's called me Ben-Hur. And at that time ice and dairy products were delivered by horse and buggy and so the kids would say, "Hey, Ben-Hur, your horse left something in the street." And when I was sixteen and I got my driver's license and filled it in, first name Ben, second name Haig, and it was Haig. I was born Ben-Hur Haig and then Bagdikian but I dropped the Hur once and for all.

02-00:18:57
Rubens: Were you allowed to take dates with the car?

02-00:19:06
Bagdikian: Just for the senior prom. But to be repaired, yes, I could do that.

02-00:19:12
Rubens: Did the family ever take vacations?

02-00:19:19
Bagdikian: We had lots of picnics on beaches along the Northeast Coast. So there would be family picnics and the church had a huge picnic. Between Boston and the town there was a state preserve with the water and a pumping station and so forth. And we would go for picnics in those woods all the time. My Boy Scout troop went through the woods. I was a member of the Boy Scout troop with the local Congregational church. But those family picnics, there was a lot of fun at those.

02-00:20:23
Rubens: So tell me how you chose Clark University?

02-00:20:37
Bagdikian: I had taken a scholarship examination at Harvard a year earlier, hoping that I could get a scholarship to go to Harvard. This scholarship exam was given in Memorial Hall, one of the big halls on the Harvard campus. Most of the other kids had gone to private preparatory schools, Exeter, Andover, Peabody, and they were red hot students. So I didn't get a scholarship, I couldn't possibly afford to go to Harvard. And at that time my father moved to Worcester. He was called to an Armenian church in Worcester, Massachusetts. And so I moved to Worcester. And there were no jobs then. I spent a whole summer trying to sell Electrolux vacuum cleaners. I never sold any because they had a regular protocol for salesmen. They'd have a sales meeting every morning and these were the questions that housewives always asked and these were the answers you were supposed to give and memorize and don't change them. But I was smarter than that. I didn't give those stereotyped answers. I gave real answers. Maybe that's why I didn't sell any machines.

02-00:22:23
Rubens: This is the summer before you entered the university?

02-00:22:26
Bagdikian: Yes. Well, I got a scholarship for the first year and then subsequent years—

02-00:23:33
Rubens: Did you live at home?

02-00:23:35
Bagdikian: I lived at home. I walked four miles to the campus every day and back. And made very good friends there. I became the editor of the campus paper.

02-00:23:06
Rubens: What year?

02-00:23:08
Bagdikian: I graduated in ’41. So ’37 to ’41. I was a premedical student and so I took all the premedical courses. One English course, one history course and the rest was lab work.

02-00:23:32
Rubens: What made you want to be a doctor?

02-00:23:34
Bagdikian: I think it was partly because of my mother’s illness and in part because in my bedroom in Stoneham there was a whole shelf of books on pulmonary diseases, which obviously my father had bought. And I read them and I got interested in medicine.

02-00:23:55
Rubens: Your father didn’t particularly urge you? It had been a dream of his, as well?

02-00:24:00
Bagdikian: He wanted me to be a minister. He’d say, “Ben, you would be a wonderful minister.” And I said, “Nothing doing.” The last thing I wanted. But I did read all those books and I became very interested in medical literature and took a premedical course and my comparative anatomy professor would pick me to assist him in dissections. I was his assistant on an operation and he said, “You’re going to be a good surgeon.” But, of course, when I graduated there were very few scholarships and Harvard Medical School had a tuition that was just in the stratosphere, out of the question.

02-00:24:58
Rubens: Well, let’s talk about how you come to work on Clark’s newspaper. Were you a cub reporter in your second year?

02-00:25:09
Bagdikian: No. There were three or four of us who sort of coagulated around the paper. I don’t know how it happened but we ran the paper. We became editors. I was editor for one year, a friend of mine for the next year. But we stuck together. Mostly writing editorials and attacking the president of the University, which is the function of a college paper. But also, I became the campus correspondent for the local regular paper, the *Worcester Gazette*, and I got ten cents a word. I can tell you that every story that I sent in that had any—for example, any visiting lecturer or faculty member that did something, I put in full middle name, doctor of philosophy, graduated from such and such a college on such a year. Ten cents for every word.

02-00:26:24
Rubens: Do you remember any issues that you wrote about or any of the issues that appeared in the paper?

02-00:26:50
Bagdikian: No. I think it was not very—I never kept a scrapbook. There was a strong visitors program at Clark where famous authors and musicians would speak and those were always good for stories. It was just before World War II and we were also interested in international affairs and wrote some about them.

02-00:27:18
Rubens: So you weren't talking about politics in the city of Worcester. It had to do with activities or events or happenings on the campus?

02-00:27:28
Bagdikian: Yes, yes.

02-00:27:29
Rubens: Do you remember what the name of the newspaper was?

02-00:27:33
Bagdikian: It had been the *Clark News*. When I became editor I said, "Listen, every college paper is called the News. We're going to change the name." I changed it to the *Clark Scarlet*. Well, what had happened was Clark in the twenties had a very radical faculty. As a matter of fact, it was established by a man who made his fortune in the early nineteenth century selling pots and pans to people going to the gold rush in California. Jonas Clark. And he established Clark University and said that they should be a university for the children of working class people. And he hired a man named G. Stanley Hall, one of the outstanding psychologists in the country, and he said, "Well, Mr. Clark, let me try first the German system, which was to have graduate work in science." And they produced. They had strikingly famous people who were on the faculty at one time or another. Fraz Boas taught there, Michelson [Albert Abraham] who worked on the speed of light taught there; Robert Goddard, the rocket man was there until the University of Chicago really got going by stealing the Clark faculty. At one time only Johns Hopkins and Clark had graduate studies and no undergraduate school. So I was deep into the sciences and premed.

02-00:29:29
Rubens: Well, Clark had a reputation because Freud had come and spoken there.

02-00:29:39
Bagdikian: Yes. That was the only place he spoke. When Freud visited the United States, he wound up at two places. Clark University and Niagara Falls. And there is a picture when Marlene and I went — her family had a connection to Freud. We went to Freud's house and there was a picture of him at Clark getting his honorary degree. Yes. The psychology was the big thing. And then when I was a student, the new president was a well-known geographer and he was very conservative politically and Clark had had a lot of radicals in the twenties. And so the Catholic college in Worcester was a very conservative anti-democratic and so we had editorial battles back and forth. But we were always accused of being radical. So when I changed the name of the paper to

Scarlet, the president of the university, who was a geographer but not otherwise broad, called me in and said, "I noticed you changed the name of the paper." I said, "Yes, Sir." "Did this have any political connotations?" And I didn't know what he was talking about. I said, "I don't know what you mean." "Scarlet, reds, communism." And I was stunned. I said, "No, it had nothing to do with communism. It happens to be the colors of the university. Clark University, scarlet is their color," and it's still called *The Scarlet.*

02-00:31:50
Rubens: So was that the center of your social life, the crowd associated with the newspaper? Of course Clark was not co-ed at the undergraduate level.

02-00:32:03
Bagdikian: Yes. Very much so. We spent time in two places at my group. One was putting out the paper and the other was the music room. We had a music teacher who really changed my life. He taught music. We learned the themes of some of the works of Beethoven, Mozart and all the great composers and we would learn the themes. And the final exam was he would play a theme from a recording and we would have to know where it came from, what the work was and so forth. And so the group that put out the paper, after we were through putting out the paper, we had learned to pick the lock in the music room. We'd go and we'd listen, because they had a wonderful huge Carlson-Stromberg record player and we would listen to Beethoven and Schubert, among others. So that was really an education within the education, is journalism and music. And I don't deserve it because I didn't work very hard there, too.

I had one English course, in which the professor, who had a starched collar and starched sleeves. He'd do his cuffs in the old fashioned way. And when I wrote he said, "You could be a good writer." I said, "Well, thank you, Mr. Ames, but I'm going to be a doctor." And then I also started a course in German, because medical schools wanted you to have German. And I just couldn't get it. And after about three weeks, I went to Dr. Bossard, "I've got to drop out. I'm so far behind I'll never catch up." And he said, "Well, I think you could, but I'll tell you, when you have a large amount of work that gets you discouraged, begin with the top paper and just don't stop until you get to the bottom." I still work that way. My study is a mess, but when I get around to wanting to put it in some kind of order for files, still not very good, I remember Dr. Bossard's words. "Begin with the one on top. Don't do anything until you've put that last paper where it ought to go."

02-00:35:17
Rubens: Did writing come easily to you?

02-00:35:26
Bagdikian: I guess so. I guess so. Marlene has a theory. The King James Version of the Bible is the only beautiful book that was written by a committee and she

thinks that my writing has the cadence of the King James. It comes from all those nights of reading the Bible by my father.

02-00:36:01
Rubens: So I hope we haven't gone too quickly over your college years. You did not take medical entrance exams. Is that right? By the time you—

02-00:36:13
Bagdikian: I took that scholarship exam and didn't get one, before college. Afterward, the only marketable skill I had was chemistry, because you spend all your premedical work and then laboratory if you weren't working on anatomy. This was before the war. Because before World War II chemistry was the big science. Afterwards it was physics, of course. But before it was chemistry and so the only marketable skill I had was chemistry. And as a matter of fact, I had a chance for a job at the Montsanto Laboratory in Springfield, Massachusetts, because I had a lot of chemistry. And that was a pretty guaranteed job, to be one of the chemist's lab assistant. And I went there in my best suit, my best and only suit, and the man's secretary said he had to go to a meeting, come back in two hours. So I spent a couple of hours walking around Springfield, Massachusetts and I saw a building that had a sign that said, "Springfield Morning Union." So without thinking about it I walked in, said, "Do you need a reporter?" They said, "Yes," and I never went back.

02-00:37:48
Rubens: Unbelievable. So you couldn't have been that driven to go to medical school if you didn't take any of the examinations.

02-00:37:57
Bagdikian: No. It was pointless because when we went to visit the associate dean at Harvard Medical—this will tell something about what the social values are—he said, "We believe you should take lots of chemistry. You should have some German. It would be a good idea to have Greek. We have a very limited number of admissions for Jews." This is all said very openly. "We tend not to take the children of Italian parentage." He went on that way describing what they don't take.

02-00:38:45
Rubens: He knew you were Armenian? Did he have any reference—

02-00:38:47
Bagdikian: No. I had a classmate who was Armenian who did go to Harvard Med but he had A-pluses everywhere. Apparently Armenians escaped that because there were two or three famous Armenian surgeons at Mass General and I think that made a difference.

02-00:39:14
Rubens: Let me just be clear. Did you go again and talk to Harvard when you were finishing up your university studies to find out whether you could get a scholarship?

02-00:39:27
Bagdikian: No. It was out of the question. I looked up the scholarships. There were only a few and they were all to the offspring of people who obviously had come over on the Mayflower.

02-00:39:45
Rubens: Okay. And Harvard was the only place you wanted to go for med school?

02-00:39:49
Bagdikian: Yes. I was a snob that way.

02-00:39:50
Rubens: So that's why I'm suggesting you may not have been that driven to become a doctor.

02-00:39:56
Bagdikian: By that time? No, that's right. Because first of all, I couldn't afford it. Secondly, I got to like writing.

02-00:40:03
Rubens: Yes. So it's during the summer after you graduate from Clark that you as it were stumble into becoming a reporter for the *Springfield Morning Union*?

02-00:40:11
Bagdikian: Yes. I was going to go to Montsanto and work for them.

02-00:40:15
Rubens: Tell me about being at the paper. Do you remember any of your first assignments?

02-00:40:20
Bagdikian: Oh. I worked from 3:00 until 11:00 and I would cover every meeting that was held in the City of Springfield. Dump truck operators of Hampden County, the Tall Cedars of Lebanon. There were four newspapers in the city and my competitor was a very good reporter and I learned a lot from him. Our paper ran hundreds of little items like that. His paper was the *Springfield Republican*, which had a long and distinguished history and he would write longer ones. But I learned from him because—

02-00:41:07
Rubens: You read what he did?

02-00:41:09
Bagdikian: Well, I sort of learned. I'd see the stories he wrote and then the stories I wrote, which were kept short. And then also my editor, city editor, had a green eyeshade. He had garters covering his cuffs so they wouldn't get ink stains. And he read every story and he'd read a note in your mailbox and they all began, "So you think you're a reporter. You didn't do this, you didn't do that, you didn't do the other thing." So even though it was a lousy paper, it had a city editor who was very demanding and told you what you did right and wrong.

02-00:42:02
Rubens: He held your feet to the fire and gave you journalism lessons.

02-00:42:08
Bagdikian: Well, that's where I really got my lessons in journalism. And right after Pearl Harbor I volunteered and I was getting ready to leave and they had a party. And I said, "Mr. Hatch, every day I came to work I thought I was going to get fired because you left a note about how wrong my stories were." He said, "You were one of the best reporters I had, but if I told you that you would have stopped working."

02-00:43:01
Rubens: You begin in the summer of 1941 and you work for about six months when Pearl Harbor happens.

02-00:43:17
Bagdikian: I was listening with my girlfriend to the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. They had a concert every Sunday afternoon. And they said, "We interrupt this program," and then they said there'd been a bombing at Pearl Harbor. I was in Worcester. So I took the train to Springfield because I knew they'd put out an extra, and they did. The minute I went in, the city editor, "Go out there and talk to people. Ask them what their reactions are." Overwhelming. The reaction was, "Well, it'll all be over in a couple of weeks. We can beat those dirty little Japs just like that." Well, of course, it wasn't.

02-00:44:03
Rubens: That's right. Just before we get to you volunteering for the Army, are there any other stories? Did you write about people's response to the war or was it mainly town business?

02-00:44:15
Bagdikian: Well, not at that paper. Those, as I say, were mostly covering town meetings.

I was asked to cover a demonstration of one of our early army regiments. They were putting on a show with search lights. The search lights would be at the county fair. The Eastern Massachusetts County Fair is a big deal. And the Army had these searchlights with a small plane caught in the searchlights. So I thought, "Here's a chance to do a very colorful story." So I described the searchlight and the small plane trying to get out of the light and I said, "It moved like an animal in travail" and I thought, "Well, that'll land in the great anthology of great English literature." I got to work the next day, waiting for an old timer who would walk behind my desk. In the newsroom culture, an old timer, is always very undemonstrative if you get a good story. He would say, "Nice story, kid." I waited and I didn't get anybody doing that but my desk mate said, "Animal in travail, animal in travail and he held his head. "Animal in travail."

So after I get out of the Air Force I worked in New York for a couple of years and then the *Providence Journal* asked me to come and work for them. And

eventually, after I had had a couple of jobs in New York, I did go to work for them. And at that time my old desk mate in Springfield was then the city editor in *Providence*. So the first time I walked in he said, "Well, look who's here. It's animal in travail."

02-00:46:32
Rubens: Now, how is it that you come to join the Air Force and when do you do that?

02-00:46:47
Bagdikian: Well, it seemed to be to be the most exciting and interesting one. As a boy, I'd always been interested in dirigibles. In the thirties, the United States had dirigibles and they were thought of as being the next transatlantic kind of passenger ship until that terrible Hindenburg fire and that ended the United States working with dirigible. So I had been very interested. I'd read everything about dirigibles as a kid. So maybe that's why I thought of the Air Force. And it was a new armed force. And I thought they were much more interested in what people knew. You had to be physically perfect, but also they were interested. They had a very long demanding test, which was a guide. They had a kind of intelligence test. It was given at Westover Field in Massachusetts. And apparently after I got up, and the examiner said, "Kid, we give a lot of tests here. You're number one." So apparently I did very well on the test. So with that early interest in dirigibles, the Air Force, I thought, would be new and different. And it was. The ground people didn't like fliers because we weren't so fussy about having our hats look rigid.

02-00:49:05
Rubens: You volunteer, but you don't enter the Air Force until—

02-00:49:09
Bagdikian: Until about early summer when they had enough fields to give training. Because they were just building the fields. And the field I went to had been a sugarcane plantation. And they had only one runway built at that time and the first few months you do a lot of physical, push-ups, everything else, and ten mile runs. Then, three months of spherical trigonometry because we were going to use celestial navigation. So we had to learn all the constellations, had to learn the astronomy of the earth.

02-00:50:07
Rubens: And where is this? Where are you first located when you enter the Air Force?

02-00:50:12
Bagdikian: The first place I was sent was Montgomery Field, where you were processed, which meant they stuck you full of needles and gave you a shot for any possible place in the world. And then I was—

02-00:50:24
Rubens: Montgomery, Alabama?

02-00:30:26
Bagdikian: Yes. But then I was stationed for my training at Selmon Field at Monroe, Louisiana.

02-00:50:35
Rubens: Now, you'd never been south before?

02-00:50:36
Bagdikian: Yes. It was my real first serious experience in the south. All the military training was in the south because that's the longest weather that you can fly in. Although they had terrible thunder storms, which are terrible for flying. You can't go over them and the planes we had couldn't go over them. But you begin with a smaller plane and then you get into a bigger plane. But we had a lot of classroom work. We had a three hour exam very Saturday and then every third Saturday a six hour exam, after which about a third of the class would be washed out. They'd go back to gunnery school. And I was in training. I was a squadron leader. They had relations between fliers, who were much more informal, and ground people, who were West Pointers. When you're flying, you didn't look very military because you're a navigator, you carried a briefcase full of books and you had to have a Mercator map, which was very thick and about three by four, and you rolled underneath your arm with a briefcase, and then you had an octant, which was for shooting stars and you looked very unmilitary. And the regular ground military officers would look at us with absolute disgust because people who were training to be pilots, which I now wish I had done, would have their silk scarves and they'd walk in formation. They weren't carrying briefcases or anything like that.

02-00:53:46
Rubens: So how is it that you didn't choose to be a pilot?

02-00:53:53
Bagdikian: I first went to the Navy as a civilian after Pearl Harbor and at that time they said we weren't taken people who were not born in the United States. That was in the beginning before they got desperate. So I signed up for the Air Force, but because the Air Force hadn't built it's airfields yet, it was about two or three months before I was called up. I qualified in the exam to be a pilot and I thought it would be more interesting doing navigation. And it was more interesting in a sort of intellectual way but I wish now I had been a pilot.

02-00:54:55
Rubens: Let me ask you one more question today and then I think maybe we should stop. Was there ever a question in your mind that you should not enter the war? Did your father want you to sign up or was he concerned for you?

02-00:55:10
Bagdikian: Oh, yes.

02-00:55:11
Rubens: There was no thought of conscientious objection?

02-00:55:16
Bagdikian: We despised Hitler. We would listen to the broadcasts and the radio and I remember the hysterical voice of Hitler. No, there was no question. Totally anti-Nazi and then Japanese. There was lots of prejudice to begin with but after they bombed Pearl Harbor there wasn't any question.

For navigating, you do a lot of classroom stuff, too. Lots of it. And the people that got into navigation were a very talented group of people. So a lot of barracks were being built then. They didn't have roofs. They just had the flooring down and we would stage plays while we were waiting for our planes to arrive. We would put on a play. We would take some movie and reenact it. We had talented people in that class. One of them was a saxophone player, and he would imitate one of the sax players from a big band. And we had one guy who knew German and he would give Nazi commands. So there was a lot of that horsing around. But we didn't even have running water. We had these bags of chemical-treated water. And we'd have to drink that. But there was a lot of Coca-Cola drinking.

02-00:57:30
Rubens: I'm going to have to stop because the tape's running out.

02-00:57:34
Bagdikian: Okay.

[End Audio File 2]

Interview #2: May 25, 2010
[Begin Audio File 3]

03-00:00:00
Rubens: It's nice to see you, Ben. This is interview two and I'd like to begin with you telling me about your experience in the Air Force.

03-00:00:06
Bagdikian: I was a first lieutenant when I left the U.S. Air Force, in the commissioned reserve. And, of course, I had been a navigator but had special duties in between.

03-00:00:37
Rubens: How did being in the South affect you? You had not been to the South before. And also, you had been raised as you said in a Yankee community and also an immigrant world. You sort of straddled two worlds.

03-00:01:06
Bagdikian: I was, of course, stunned by the degree of separation between the blacks and whites and the repercussions of that. Almost every white family had a black woman who came in the morning and made breakfast, did the washing and the ironing, took care of the kids getting off to school, cooked dinner, presented the dinner, and then, after cleaning up, she would take the bus home. And when I was stationed for quite a long time in an airfield in northern Louisiana, in Monroe, Louisiana— Selman Air Force Field. I and my best friend, who also was in the Air Force and a navigator, I rented a house in the town so that we wouldn't have to sleep on the base when we were not on duty and so that our wives could come down. The buses made two stops in front of our house. One was in the mealtime. The fire captain's wife lived next door and she would bring a tray covered with a napkin for his lunch and the bus driver would take it downtown and present the lunch. And then at five o'clock, six o'clock, seven o'clock, [the bus] would be filled with black women who had worked all day in the white houses in that area. They were always in back of the bus. One time, I got in the bus, and I was in uniform and I was standing up front. There were some seats in the back so I went back and I sat down, and the bus driver came and said, "You can't sit there." I said, "Well, there's a seat here." I said, "I'll stand." "You can't stand there. You got to come up to the front of the bus." We had been told when we came down to the field, "Now, you're going to run across a lot of very hidebound local ideas. Don't get involved, whatever your personal feelings might be." But it was very hard.

03-00:04:12
Rubens: How about your own squadron? The military would not be desegregated until after the war, so I assume there were no African Americans in your squadron, in the corps that you were in.

03-00:04:41
Bagdikian: No. Blacks were kept separate. They were usually working in labor battalions more than anything else. But it was separate. We were not integrated. And

once I had an experience with that after I became an officer. Once a month, flying officers had to serve as the head of the military police, and they were responsible for checking the perimeter of the field. Enlisted men were stationed in a perimeter around the field in preparation. If they were overseas, they would do the same thing. You would approach as quietly as possible and if they were awake they would say, “Who goes there? Friend or foe?” You’d say, “Friend.” “Advance, Friend, and give the password.” We had a different password every night. So I’d give a password. We were supposed to ask them the rules of keeping guard. It was a set rule. “It is my duty as a guard,” et cetera, et cetera. And I would ask them most of the time to respect that.

Once a month we would have that duty, and on one particular night I was called by the military police who had received a call from the civilian police in the next town, and they said, “Listen, we’ve got one of your soldiers here and he’s lying down on the railroad tracks waiting for a train to come. Come and pick him up.” I happened to be on guard duty, and we went there and he was lying on the track. And I knelt down next to him and I said, “Son, why are you lying on the tracks?” He said, “I want to die.” I said, “Why do you want to die?” He said, “My father committed suicide and this is the anniversary and I don’t want to live anymore.” I talked to him; he was crying. I said, “Come on with me and let’s talk about it in the morning.” So we brought him in and I took him to the flight surgeon. They probably sent him for psychiatric treatment.

Again, that once-a-month when you stopped flying and you were with the military police—I got a call from the head of the military police saying, “There’s a riot in the black barracks.” When you were on duty you wore your 45 pistol with a holster. The military policemen said, “Lieutenant, it’s your job to go in there. Now, I would advise you take out your pistol and shoot one of them in the knee and that’ll end that rioting.” I said, “Well, I’m not going to shoot anyone that I don’t have to.” And he said, “You’ve got to be prepared.” I said, “I’ll just unbuckle the holster but I’ll leave the gun there.” I said, “You go in” to the MP, “and yell attention,” because every soldier by reflex learned that when an officer says, “Attention,” you stand up straight. He said that and the blacks who had been fighting each other with knives were momentarily stunned. I walked up to the line where they were and I quietly said, “Drop all your weapons,” and they all dropped their weapons. And after they dropped their weapons, I told the MP, “Okay, they’re yours now,” and retired. Now black soldiers were the cooks in the mess hall and did all of the dirty work. They would have to mow the lawn of the commandant’s house, pick up cigarette buts and that kind of work. It was also an example of how we were all expected to more readily shoot blacks than whites.

03-00:09:45

Rubens: This was something, of course, you knew about but you had never experienced.

03-00:09:56
Bagdikian: Well, I had been through the South before, but usually on a train. And during my training, we loved to spend weekends in New Orleans because the original Preservation Jazz Band was there then and New Orleans was a fun city anyway. I knew that route went through the Cajun country, which was fascinating and which I liked, where they spoke a patois that was part French, part local language. I learned that. Then we would visit Natchez, where they had preserved the old plantation houses. Very elaborate. They'd made museum pieces of them. So looking at local things in that area, I got to know pretty well that part of the South.

03-00:11:04
Rubens: At what point did you get married?

03-00:11:07
Bagdikian: My best friend and I rented a cottage in the city. He was already married and his wife came down. My about-to-be wife came down later and my friend and I—that's a long story.

03-00:11:34
Rubens: We don't need too much of it, but some reflection would be nice.

03-00:11:36
Bagdikian: We had terrible meals on the base because it turns out that the chef in charge of food on the base was selling the best steaks to the restaurants in the city. After the Air Forces found out, they sent him to Alaska, and we began to get fruit for the first time. I was the squadron leader when I was a cadet. You were a cadet for about six or eight weeks, until you got your commission and became an officer. I was in charge of my squadron as a cadet. And on that day everyone was given an orange by the ground officers, who hated flying people anyway, and said, "All right. One orange, one man." My best friend happened to be literally allergic to citrus. If you cut citrus and squeezed it in something he ate, he would throw up. So when they handed him an orange, he thrust it into my hand. So there I was leading my squad down to the flight line and I had two oranges. The ground officer said, "Mister, bring your squad to attention." So I stopped my squad. He said, "What are you doing with two oranges? You're supposed to have one." Well, when you're questioned by an officer and you're a subordinate, you have only three permitted answers. "Yes, Sir; No, Sir; No excuse, Sir." So I said, "No excuse, Sir." He said, "You heard you're supposed to have just one orange." "Yes, Sir." "Well, all right. Who gave you that orange?" And I said, "Someone put it in my hand," and my friend Elmer said, "I gave it to him, Sir." So he said, "All right, you're canceled for the weekend and you'll have weekend duty."

Our weekend duty was digging post holes in the swamp around the camp for a fence that would go around the perimeter. Do you know what a post hole digger looks like? It's like two shovels with a hinge. You put it down in the ground, squeeze it and bring up—supposedly—dirt. But this was a swamp. So

every time I put it down and spread the handles, it squirted mud, and pretty soon I was covered from head to toe with mud. We were cursing and it was hot under layers of mud, when in the distance a little figure from the base came close yelling, "Bagdikian, Bagdikian, Bagdikian," and I yelled, "What do you want?" He said, "There's an emergency phone call for you." Well, that usually meant that there's a death in the family or something like that. As I was on the way the mud was caking over me thinking, "Maybe it's my father," who had had one heart attack but had recovered. I was wondering which person had died; I couldn't think of any other big crisis possible. So I went to the day room where there was an old sergeant who was in charge of the room. I remember the phone was on the wall with the receiver hanging down. And as I picked it up, the mud in my hand fell to the floor and the sergeant, in language I won't repeat, said, "Don't dirty up my floor." I said, "Hello? Who is this?" "This is Betty." I said, "Yes, what's wrong?" "My sister thinks we should have a white wedding." I didn't say anything for a long while. Then I said, "Will you please tell your sister to mind her own goddamn business." I remember hanging it up and later being in touch to explain my circumstances and apologize for my anger..

As it turned out, we did get a white wedding. It was a ridiculous affair, in some ways.

03-00:16:16
Rubens: Where were you literally married?

03-00:16:19
Bagdikian: In Monroe, Louisiana. My wife wanted a military marriage. So my commanding officer, a very nice guy who came from one of the old families in Chicago, a very nice man, agreed he would get the church. He got the biggest church in town, which was a Presbyterian church and [said] a chaplain from the field would conduct the ceremony. My friend would be my best man and his wife was maid of honor. But we were supposed to have a military marriage, which is when you leave the church after marriage underneath crossed swords.

Well, Stanley Bachrach was a man who'd been a sax player in a jazz band before the war and he was always the joke of the squadron. He got sick all the time when he flew. We had to learn spherical trigonometry. He'd keep saying in the middle of the night, "Ask me again what the Greenwich Mean Meridian is. Ask me again," asking about all these trigonometric things, until someone told him to shut up. Well, Stanley who was supposed to bring the swords, was missing. So we couldn't start the ceremony. My wife had a white gown and I was, of course, in my uniform. It turned out Stanley had forgotten to get permission and he was arrested at the gate for taking weaponry off a military reservation without permission. So my commanding officer called the military police on the base and said, "He's got permission. Let him out." So he finally arrived.

We had the wedding, we had the crossed swords, we walked underneath afterward, and then we took the city bus back to the cottage we were living in, where we had drinks ready. We were on a bus, a regular city bus, my wife in her white gown—all the women on the bus were very interested. They said, "Oh, that's a beautiful gown. It will make such nice curtains afterward," and gave her advice of that sort. We got off at our stop and we had a party at the house where we had drinks, because you had very cheap drinks at the PX. And after we had drinks, people were very happy, having a good time. And Stanley, who was the odd ball in the squadron, came to me and said, "Listen, do you have any books of Browning's poetry?" And I said, "Not with me. Why?" He said, "I've got to find this one Browning poem." "Why?" Well, he had met the girl who had lived in the house next door and he was sort of sweet-talking her and he wanted to read some Robert Browning to her.

03-00:20:18
Rubens: What year were you married and what was your wife's name?

03-00:20:21
Bagdikian: My wife's name was Elizabeth [Betty] Ogasapian and our wedding was on October 2, 1942.

03-00:20:22
Rubens: You had been in the service how long?

03-00:20:26
Bagdikian: I volunteered right after Pearl Harbor and I was called up in May. I first had standard army basic training and then had flight training, which included astronomical and spherical trigonometry. I got my commission and wings in February of 1943. Since we were the first graduating class of navigators, they took part of my class and made us instructors because there was a flood of new cadets coming in. So I was an instructor for a while and then I was put on special duty to put out a magazine for navigators. By that time I was in Ellington Field, Texas, and I lived at a housing project in Texas City, Texas, which later became famous for blowing up.

I was asked, as a special duty, to plan a navigation system for flying over the North Pole. And that was a problem because, first of all, half the time there are no stars to take a reading and half the time there's no sun. And also, the existing maps weren't good because that's where all the meridians come together, plus the fact that your compass points not to the north but to the magnetic pole 300 miles away. So I worked out a way of solving that and turned it in to the officers who had asked me to do it. Later I was visited by counter-intelligence corps agents. They said, "We want to ask you—you were given this assignment and you were supposed to talk to nobody else about it." I said, "That's right." "But you did talk to someone in Washington, didn't you?" I said, "No, I didn't." He said, "That's impossible. You must have." I said, "Well, I didn't. I don't know why you're saying that." He said, "Because what you came up with is what some specialists in Washington came up

with." I said, "Look, you give two people the same problem and they're probably going to come out with the same answer."

03-00:23:33
Rubens: Were you ever overseas?

03-00:23:38
Bagdikian: No, I was not. Towards the end of the war I was scheduled to go to Okinawa and in preparation I was transferred to March Field here in California. And every morning at 5:30 we'd go down ready for flight, first to Hawaii and then Okinawa, and they would say there'd been a hold put on it. Day after day there was a hold. And then one day we went down and they said, "They just dropped this huge bomb on Hiroshima," so I never got overseas.

03-00:24:20
Rubens: I wanted to ask you what was happening to your political consciousness as a result of being in the South, seeing firsthand the racism, living with a more diverse group of people, and finally, wasn't there one of your squadron mates who introduced you to Marxism? Did you start studying other political philosophies?

03-00:24:47
Bagdikian: Well, I was, of course, appalled at what happened to blacks in the South. I would sometimes go to where the blacks in Monroe lived; it was called New Town. And I would just stand unobtrusively on the edge of the area listening to black people talk, and I realized [something was] going to change [when] I heard was two young black guys, one of them playing the role of a white saying, "Hey, boy, what you doing walking on a sidewalk when I'm here?" "I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't mean not to please. I'm sorry." "Oh, I'll whup you for doing that." They were playing a game, imitating the white man and the black man and I thought to myself, "That's a sign that they know exactly what the roles are and they have contempt for it and sooner or later there's going to be a break." But it was later rather than sooner. But I was appalled by that. We were told, "Don't get involved in racial matters."

But there was an extraordinary black woman, when my wife was pregnant, who came to work for us. She was a strong character. Her name was Mary Fitch. We'd have lunch together. I'd say, "Mary, come on and have lunch with us." She said, "I'm not supposed to sit at this table, but only at your house and us'n house"—she said us'n house because she took care of it— "In us'n house, I'm going to sit at the table with you." She also did some cleaning for my commandant's wife. And she said, "Listen, I worked over there. I asked her for a glass of water." In the South, if you're a guest and you want water, it's in the refrigerator in a pitcher. You don't take it out of the faucet. If you're black, you take it out of the faucet. And Mary told her, "In us'n house, I get it out of the refrigerator like they do." And the commandant's wife said, "Whose house is that?" "That's Betty and Ben's house." "Well, not here." One day I got a knock on the back door of my house and there was Mary

Fitch's husband. He said, "Mr. B., I'm sorry to come." I said, "Come on in." "No, I don't want to come in but would you please tell Mary not to be so uppity. She's going to get in trouble." And I said, "Well, I'll tell her to be careful but I can't stop her."

Sometimes I'd get back late from a flight, around eleven o'clock or midnight, and she'd still be there, so I'd drive her back to her house. As I'm driving back, she would tell me all kinds of stories. It turned out she made special potions for special diseases. Blacks came to her and sometimes whites. She told me what they were, but I've forgotten. She told me how you take the bark from a gooseberry tree. You take some pecan shells. She had this formula that she told me. And she became almost a member of the family. And years later, about twenty years ago, Marlene and I went back to Monroe. We found Mary Fitch. She was still alive but she had a hammer next to her rocking chair on her porch. I said, "Mary, what's the hammer for?" She said, "These young guys," pointing to some black guys there. "They're bad types. They're bad. They steal. They use drugs. They're shameless." We have a picture of her, and she was still uppity and bright.

03-00:29:48
Rubens: So were you becoming more politically sophisticated or leftist? I thought there was a squadron mate who was a Marxist, who introduced you to Marxism.

03-00:30:01
Bagdikian: No. There were three people who were on that base who were friends. A friend of mine who was a Marxist, another friend who was a Communitarian. He was trying to recruit people to form a living-off-nature community in British Columbia. And he wanted me to be a part. I said, "No, I don't want to do that." They would discuss issues and they would argue Marxism and Communitarians. I had been brought up a Congregationalist. My father was a Congregationalist minister but I became a Unitarian later.

03-00:31:07
Rubens: So in terms of studying politics or becoming more educated—

03-00:31:10
Bagdikian: Oh. We argued. I'd argue. My Marxist friend would try to show me—what was that newspaper—*New Masses*. And he'd show it to me. He got it in the mail anonymously and it would have political articles in it. And then the next week they would have renounced that article because a committee had since decided that the article did not hew to official doctrine. I said, "How can you read something that is written by someone who wants to say something and the committee tells him that he was wrong?" And we argued like that. He was always to the left but I was never attracted to that. No, I was a liberal. I voted for Franklin Roosevelt. He was the first man I ever voted for.

03-00:32:11
Rubens: Do you remember where you were when Roosevelt died?

03-00:32:15
Bagdikian: Absolutely. I was in the Western Union office on 58th Street in New York. I'd had pre-overseas leave, which gave me about five days at home

I was a day late getting back to my squadron, which was scheduled to go overseas, and I had to inform my commanding officer. Very important to let him know. So I went to the Western Union office and I walked in and I said, "I'd like to send a telegram." And the woman was just standing there staring. I said, "Excuse me, ma'am. I would like to send a telegram." She just said, "He's gone." I said, "What do you mean?" "He's gone." I said, "Who's gone?" "He's gone. The President is gone." And she was stunned. And when I took the train back to my base, the railroad was lined with people. He had died in Warm Springs and the funeral train went through the South up to Washington. And everywhere on my way back, there were lines of people. Blacks would be lined up for miles, then there'd be whites later, and the farther north you got, the more they were mixed. But the railroad line was absolutely lined with people waiting for the funeral train.

03-00:34:38
Rubens: What was your home base at that time?

03-00:34:46
Bagdikian: I think by that time I'd been sent to Biloxi, Mississippi for air-sea rescue training [ARC]. That's where we worked with flying boats, which is what I was on, plus a B-17 that had a fully equipped sailboat attached to the bomb bay for dropping in the ocean. We didn't know yet about the B-29s, but they were going to go from Okinawa to Japan. And the ARC rescue units, which was a B17 with a sailboat plus PT boats. And if any of the crews of the planes were hit by the Japanese and had to ditch, it was up to us to get the crews out. If they were near Japan, our PBY was supposed to land there near Yokohama and pick them up. It was my job on the PBY, to do the actual rescue work. Like once we had to bring in a corpse. I couldn't swim then but I had a Mae West, so I'd jump in the water.

03-00:36:23
Rubens: The Mae West, for people who don't know, it was a life jacket.

03-00:36:30
Bagdikian: It was a vest of the kind that you have in airplanes now, that have the CO2 bottles. You pull the cord and it inflates it and it keeps you afloat in the water. I needed to because I didn't swim. So I would then paddle around. And we always had to keep one engine going because our plane was so old; we didn't have a self-starter in both engines. I had to decide what the waves were like, how strong the wind was, how deep the waves were, whether it was safe to land. Because when you land on the water, it's like landing on concrete. It knocks all the rivets out. And it was my job, once we landed, just to go around the whirling propeller and take the body and bring it around and get it inside the plane.

For sensitivity training, one time they put me in the middle of a life raft in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico and took off. As they left, my crew members, who were kind of a family, yelled, “We’re not coming back. We’re going to have a good time in New Orleans,” and they disappeared. And then I got this real sense of loneliness, because there I was and 360 degrees, you’re looking around, [it’s] all horizon, and I was just there floating all alone thinking, “What if they can’t find me?” And then this huge pelican began circling over me wondering what kind of creature I was. Well, if you’ve ever watched pelicans, when they dive for a fish, they go like this [gestures with hand swooping down] and then they stop and they lower their beaks and they plunge into the water to stun the fish and then they have big scooped lower jaws scoop up the fish. And he was circling me thinking, “What kind of fish is this?” And I was thinking, “What if he comes down and deflates the life raft?” But eventually, of course, my crew did find me.

03-00:39:31
Rubens: Yes. So you had no advance knowledge, of course, about Hiroshima but did you have a response to this atomic weapon? Did you find out information about it right away?

03-00:39:47
Bagdikian: Yes, yes. I would have been going overseas and the word came through that they’d dropped the atomic bomb. And my first reaction, I have to admit, because I didn’t know much about it, was: “That’s wonderful. The war is over.” And I broke security and called my wife. I said, “Isn’t it wonderful? The war is over.” But she said, “It isn’t wonderful. They killed everybody in that city.” And I was taken aback and realized that while it was a terrible thing in Hiroshima, it meant that the war was over. And it was the only time I’ve ever been drunk, because every plane scheduled for overseas has an officer who inspects it. It’s an officer of weights and measures to make sure that everything is stacked right so you don’t get overbalanced and move in the air. But everybody found ways of hiding bottles of scotch and bourbon and so forth. So when the war was over, in March Field here in California, we all went to Sacramento and we drank our bottles. I was drinking bourbon. And I remember daylight came, feeling very high. I had some French fries and I thought I had a problem. I’d never been drunk before and I said, “Now, there’s the French fries, but they're wider than my mouth. How do I get them into my mouth?” And I pondered this problem until I had a brilliant idea, that I pick them in and put them in lengthwise. So that was my experience with being drunk.

03-00:41:56
Rubens: So what had you been thinking about that you would do when you got out of the service? You now had a wife and a child living in Rhode Island.

03-00:42:46
Bagdikian: Well after the war, my best friend—remember the story about the oranges—lived in New York. He said they were looking for an assistant editor for a new

magazine, because travel magazines were starting after the war. For example, *Holiday* started. The old *Flying Aces* became *Flying Traveler* for private flying. So I joined the staff in New York and was going to move to New York. And then my friend left and I became the editor of the new magazine. And so I was looking for a New York home. One weekend I would go back through *Providence* where my wife was.

03-00:43:40
Rubens: How was it that your wife ended up in *Providence*? How is it that you relocated your family there?

03-00:43:46
Bagdikian: Well, I was looking for a house in New York for them, and in Jamaica I found a duplex where the rent on one half would pay the mortgage on the other half, and it was perfect and within commuting distance of downtown. So it was all arranged—in those days when you bought a house it was very formal. You sat in the mortgage company's office, big mahogany oval table, chairs around, there were lawyers there, the banker is there and I'm there. All the parties involved. And veterans got $250 at the end of the war for the purpose of starting civilian life and I had $250 for down payment, which the bank had accepted, because I was going to get income from [renting] the other side of the house. And we sat down to sign the papers and the banker came in and said, "Mr. Bagdikian, I'm sorry. We'll need $500, not $250." I said, "Wait a minute. We had an agreement that I would put down $250." He said, "I know, but since that time, there's been an invasion." I said, "What do you mean there's been an invasion?" "A black family has bought a house two blocks away and so now we'll need more money down on your house."

03-00:45:30
Rubens: Because they were arguing that the value of the property had gone down?

03-00:45:35
Bagdikian: Had gone down because there was going to be a black family two blocks away.

03-00:45:41
Rubens: So you didn't buy there, obviously.

03-00:45:44
Bagdikian: I said, "The deal's off." First of all, I didn't have $500, and secondly, I was so disgusted.

03-00:45:55
Rubens: Was your wife from Providence, Rhode Island?

03-00:45:57
Bagdikian: No, she was from Worcester, Massachusetts, where my father had a church, and so I moved from the town I grew up in —recently a friend of mine found my address. He's a genealogist and he's doing a genealogy for me. When he was in Cambridge for a conference, he took a picture of the house I grew up

in. Here it is—this is the house I grew up in from the time I was two years old until I graduated from high school, after college.

03-00:46:55
Rubens: Why don't you hold it up in front of you. Let's see if it will show on the camera. Thank you. Tell me about working in New York.

03-00:47:49
Bagdikian: Well, I finally quit because it turned out the publisher was crooked—he'd say, "Hire the best writers, hire the best photographers, models and so forth." I'd do it, agree on pay and then he'd send them a check for half that amount. And I said, "You can't do that." He said, "Oh they're bloodsuckers. They'll take it." And so I quit. So I moved back to Providence where we lived in an old Yankee house that had a sign on the front, 1835, and I had two very good friends on the paper. One was a literary editor in the paper. It was an unusually good paper.

03-00:48:45
Rubens: Which paper is this?

03-00:48:47
Bagdikian: This is the *Providence Journal*. It was owned by one of the richest families [in town], who had owned woolen mills. They made the uniforms for the Union soldiers in the 1860s. And their daughter, who's a rebel, was a part of that family, and she was married to my close friend who was a poet, Winfield Scott. Winfield was a literary editor who had me review a lot of books. I reviewed most of the political books. The paper had a really quite outstanding book section and it was very, very good. Then he moved to Santa Fe and urged me to become the literary editor. I said, "No, I like being a reporter." And I did continue.

03-00:50:03
Rubens: So I'm trying to get what made you go to work for the *Providence Journal*

03-00:50:12
Bagdikian: They were looking for a labor editor. And I said, "Well, I've covered labor but not as a specialty." But after the New York job blew up, we had a place in Providence where one of my friends lived and looked after my wife while I was not there. When I came back they needed somebody at the *Providence Journal*, so I went there and they hired me. At first I covered everything. They were a very good paper. Nothing happened in the state of Rhode Island that they didn't cover.

03-00:51:03
Rubens: Were they a morning and an evening paper?

03-00:51:06
Bagdikian: Yes, there was a morning and an evening edition and I worked for both, really. If I did a special series, it might run in both. But very soon I was doing mostly special series. But I loved covering the police court because it gave me

a look at the part of the population you usually don't see. And these are the lower level. These are the people who are arrested for loitering, drunkenness, prostitution, petty theft. There was one part of the city where prostitution was centered, and every time the prostitutes would appear, I knew what would happen. They'd be lined up in the back of the courtroom in their best clothes, very prim. Each would have a folded twenty-five dollar bill in the hand, and then the Speaker of the State House of Representatives in Rhode Island would walk in, their lawyer, and go before the judge. He'd say, "Your Honor, these girls have been led astray and are good girls and I would ask you to be lenient." And the judge, who was very self-righteous, would give them a lecture. "You should be home helping your mothers," and so forth. They would all look very modest. And he'd charge them twenty-five dollar fines each. They'd hand over their well-folded twenty-five dollars and go out and go back to being prostitutes.

But I also saw all kinds of cases. When there were people who didn't like to cover that court, I'd take it every chance. And it was in between special stories where I'd have two weeks, two months, three months. I'd like to go back to covering Sixth District police court because it was a look at society and people who appeared before it.

03-00:53:30
Rubens: So tell me a little bit more about the newspaper. Who was your editor? How big a newspaper was it?

03-00:53:39
Bagdikian: A rich family owned the paper, and they hired a publisher, a man named Sevellon Brown, who was very aware of how bad most papers were at the time. And he was going to have a paper that wasn't. We were a small state, Rhode Island. We had sixteen bureaus. Nothing happened in that state which wasn't in the paper. He was very proud of that. Then after a while he began noticing my stories. He didn't like the news magazines. At that time, *Time* magazine used to make up cutesy words and do silly stories. And *Newsweek* was a very poor imitation of it.

And so he said, "We'll save fifteen weeks of them and then I want you to do an analysis of them." Well, I did a series on them and that was distributed through half a dozen papers that would take these special series from the *Journal*: Saint Louis *Post-Dispatch*, the Louisville *Courier-Journal, Baltimore Sun, Denver Post* and one other. And that would be syndicated and then frequently republished in a pamphlet, and people would send in for the pamphlets. So there were things of that sort that I did.

03-00:55:36
Rubens: So are you referring specifically to the series you called "Pitchmen of the Press"? That was a series of articles on leading columnists and commentators.

03-00:56:10
Bagdikian: No, that was another one. It looked at Drew Pearson, who was very popular. Westbrook Pegler was very popular. Fulton Lewis was very popular. They were mostly reactionary. And Walter Winchell. And Brown gave me the time to check into the things that they reported and to report on what was factually right and factually wrong. The [publications by these reactionaries] were overwhelmingly sloppy and wrong. We later compiled the articles and published them as a pamphlet, “Pitchmen of the Press.”

03-00:56:47
Rubens: Is that something that newspapers commonly did, make pamphlets out of series?

03-00:57:09
Bagdikian: Oh, we did. *The Saint Louis Post Dispatch* did it. They were a very good paper then. A Pulitzer still ran it. We made pamphlets of the special series that we published.

03-00:57:32
Rubens: How were they circulated?

03-00:57:35
Bagdikian: Well, if anybody who wanted one, it was mailed to them. And hundreds of people did write to us from around the country, because the series would appear in the other papers around the country, and people wanted each series in one pamphlet. And in between writing these series, I would like to go back covering the Six District courts because I was fascinated with seeing what happened to that level of society.

03-00:58:15
Rubens: So let’s take a break to change the tape.

03-00:58:18
Bagdikian: Okay.

[End Audio File 3]

[Begin Audio File 4]

04-00:00:00
Rubens: Tape two of the 25th of May with Ben Bagdikian. Tell me a little bit more about the early days of being a reporter. You went to work for the *Providence Journal* in 1947. You had basically a year and a half in New York, something like that.

04-00:00:18
Bagdikian: Yes, and then I went to the *Journal*. I was doing a whole variety of local stories. A lot of them were funny stories or feature stories. They took the notice of the editors, who began giving me much more serious and long stories, and pretty soon I was sort of the golden boy who wrote all of these

long series that either won prizes or were re-circulated. There was some envy by a couple of reporters, but for the most part, people were happy to be on a paper that was getting prizes nationally. I just got an email from a kid named Madden whose father was the sports editor of the *Providence Journal.* He wrote: “I hear you’re in Berkeley. How are you? Remember my father? He told me that working in the same newsroom as Ben Bagdikian was like wearing the pinstripes of the New York Yankees.” And I thought that was very nice.

04-00:01:55
Rubens: In 1953, the paper gets a Pulitzer Prize for a series that you ran on—

04-00:02:04
Bagdikian: It wasn’t an individual Pulitzer. That was a group prize. I never mentioned it when later I was introduced to speak. Someone once called me a “Pulitzer Prize winner.” But when I sent out my résumés—and I did quite a bit of public speaking around the country—I didn’t include that, because there were seven other people on the team that won the prize. We got a Pulitzer for very fast on-the-spot reporting. And I didn’t like the idea of acting as though I had won a Pulitzer Prize all alone.

04-00:02:48
Rubens: What was that story? Wasn’t it on a bank robbery?

04-00:02:51
Bagdikian: Yes. There was a bank robbery that occurred in the morning, and the robbers went through three or four states as the police tried to catch them. And by our final addition of the afternoon, they had been caught and we covered every single place they had been and what happened. I had been able to find out from a friend at the bank how much money they’d gotten, how they’d got it, and so we won a group prize for on-the-spot reporting.

04-00:03:48
Rubens: By 1953, there has been three years of Joe McCarthy hounding the Congress and trying to ferret out communists from the State Department. What was the impact of McCarthyism on you and on your reporting?

04-00:04:12
Bagdikian: There were two things. Truman started the security system that every federal employee had to pass. I did a long series on that and the number of people—it was not very well done because it excluded, for example, the CIA, which had a number of Columbia University Russian scholars who would review the Russian papers and report to the CIA what was being said in them. But the postmaster general stopped the delivery [of these papers] because they were communist literature. There were things of that sort that they would report. But also there began to be prejudice against foreign scientists who had been involved in the development of the atomic bomb. And so I did a piece. I think I’ve got a copy of it someplace upstairs that showed how that could not have been done without people like Kistiakowsky, Bohr, people that came from

Denmark, refugees from Russia and so forth, and how they were the ones who understood the possibilities of breaking the atom. So I did a long series on what was lost by the security system excluding what would be needful for the United States in an atomic world.

04-00:06:39
Rubens: I think that's called "What Price Security?"

04-00:06:42
Bagdikian: Yes, yes.

04-00:06:45
Rubens: Yes. You told me about the tenor of the times made you decide to become a citizen—you weren't a native-born citizen. There's a cute little story you told me when we were preparing for this interview.

04-00:07:11
Bagdikian: You mean did it ever make it a problem that I was not—

04-00:07:16
Rubens: Well, you couldn't join the Navy. You had raised that as an issue because you weren't born in the United States. So during the McCarthy period you do apply for your citizenship papers. Someone encouraged you to do that.

04-00:07:32
Bagdikian: Yes. What was happening was the immigration service would sometimes nab somebody and say, "Show me your papers." We're seeing the same kind of thing happening now in Arizona. And they would sometimes put [people without papers] on the next plane. Then I became very friendly with a judge in a court that I liked to cover, the police court. And there was a case that came up of a man who didn't have his papers, and he was appealing. The judge said, "You got to go to the Superior Court. I don't handle that." But he and I would frequently go back to his chambers and talk. I said to him, "Well, I'm okay because I'm naturalized through my father. I made a copy of his naturalization paper and my name's on it." And he didn't say anything for a while. And he said, "Well, if someone came to me and said I've made a copy of my father's naturalization papers, I would tell them that is illegal, punishable by a $10,000 fine and ten years in prison. You cannot copy your citizenship paper." And I said, "Oh." And he said, "I would tell that person that it would be a much better idea to go to the federal court here down the street and get my own papers." And I said, "Thank you. I'll tell my friend." So I went in and applied and I got up with two or three others and we raised out hands and said, "Yes, I support the Constitution." So now I have my own citizenship papers.

04-00:09:50
Rubens: I'm trying to get at, in general, the impact of the McCarthy era. There was a lot of fear because an investigation alone was construed as an indictment and brought about the usurpation of civil liberties, really.

04-00:10:06
Bagdikian: Yes, yes. It was a very reactionary period.

04-00:10:14
Rubens: So how would you characterize the politics of your paper during this time?

04-00:10:21
Bagdikian: The paper was very good about that. They were editorially against restrictions of that sort. Now, they editorialized against unions and they endorsed every Republican they could. But on the news side, they were very balanced and took a lot of initiative. They were one of the better papers, except for their editorials.

04-00:10:57
Rubens: Now, you mention labor unions. Did you belong to a union?

04-00:11:08
Bagdikian: I helped organize the union at the paper.

04-00:11:10
Rubens: Tell us about it.

04-00:11:12
Bagdikian: Well, the paper was very good but the pay was ridiculously low. It had a pension plan. If you worked for them for twenty years, until age sixty-five, you could then get something like a third or a quarter of your pay for a pension. It was a ridiculous plan. And the pay was low. I think I have my pay records and I have my income tax reports from going back to that time. And so when they started forming a union I joined it. And when word got around that I had joined, the editors stopped talking to me. Every day for a month I'd come in and I'd go to the desk and tell the city editor, "I'm available." They'd say, "Okay, we'll let you know." They'd give me nothing. So it was a battle of silence. They wouldn't speak to me. They wouldn't give me any assignments. I would just sit there. But I would make sure to check in. I'd say, "I'm in the library now but I'm available."

And I was reading all the out-of-town papers. And at the time *The Herald Tribune* was still being published in New York. And I noticed a little notice. It said, "Applications are being accepted for a Reid Fellowship that would pay $5,000 for a family to live abroad each year." So I applied for it and I got it. So after a month of nobody speaking to me at the *Journal*, I went up and I said, "Well, I'm leaving the paper." And they said, "Well, sorry to see you go. What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to Europe with my family." And they said, "Oh, is that so? Well, why don't you be our foreign correspondent?" because they were always glad to get something for nothing. And I knew the officer of the biggest bank in town. He was an Irishman from Wall Street. The other officers for the bank were the failed sons of the owners of the bank who flunked out of every college they went to, but Bill Morrison had come from Wall Street and he was very smart, and he and I were friends.

So I got this grant. First thing we did, we drove to Boston, my wife and I and the kids, to the [office of the] French Line. We bought cabin-class tickets from Boston to South Hampton and from South Hampton back to Boston. And they were the most wonderful days going. It was a beautiful ship to begin with. And we went on the Liberté. So we had a year. And it turned out that a number of magazines wanted me to write for them while I was on the fellowship. So what I would do is for every country I would have read a lot of literature about it. In reporting, I had a fairly systematic approach to a story. Before I talked to the leaders of some kind of policy or the head of some state, I would talk to people who were affected by it first, and after I had avoided using the anecdotes of just one person, I would talk to various levels of society, agricultural people, the industrial people, people in the capital city, people in the country. Then I would see the prime minister and the president. And so I would write every few weeks a series about that country, what was happening. There was France, England, Spain, Germany, West Germany, and then in between I wrote sort of funny stories about our experiences as a family and those ran and I got fifteen dollars for every one of those and that would be deposited in the bank, and my friend Bill Morrison—I said, "Bill, you let me know when I have to come home, when I had enough money to return." And he and I were very good friends.

I went through the Middle East alone once, and had my family in the house in London. The Aberdare Gardens. In Spain, Franco was still in power. Before you entered every village there were these guys with their sideways hats. Everybody entering a village was recorded, everybody leaving a village was recorded. And then once in Spain a shoe-shine boy—the shoe-shine boys were very aggressive. They'd try to put some shoe polish on my shoes and I'd shoo them away, shoo them away. Finally, one of them quickly took the heel off my shoe, says, "I'll put it back on. I'll do it for twenty-five cents." When I was arguing with him, a man in a trench coat came up very solemnly and said to the kid, "Put it back." He was a secret policeman watching this foreigner. So he put it back. There were a lot of secret police in Spain then. I wrote family-type of stories in between.

04-00:18:33
Rubens: This is 1956?

04-00:18:35
Bagdikian: Yes. 1956 and part of '57.

04-00:18:38
Rubens: I don't want to leave the topic of your years at the *Providence Journal* too quickly. When had you started your freelance journal writing? The first article you have on your bio is in 1947 with a publication in *The New Yorker*. It's titled "Unlucky Number."

04-00:19:18
Bagdikian: Before the war, I was part of a group of guys, we were a social gang. One of them was a sculptor who went to Rome to practice his art. One was Bob I. White, who was Stanford White's grandson. Had a big estate in Long Island. He was a painter. Another was also a painter. George Irving was a singer and Harold Buck was a PR man. And we had this group and we stayed in touch before the war, during the war, after the war.

04-00:20:07
Rubens: Were these college mates of yours?

04-00:20:09
Bagdikian: One was a college mate but the others either went to the schools of design or to music school. So we were together and after the war we got together again and then I moved to New York. One of them was this Harold Buck, who was the counter-intelligence corps during the war and they were the first ones to enter Japan after the surrender. And they looked like American giants, and he described it all. He'd go to a village and there'd be a big sign. "Welcome, conquerors." He told very funny stories. I said, "You ought to write that," and he's start writing it and it was terrible. I said, "No, no, don't put it that way." He said, "You write it." So I would ask him questions and he gave me the information and I wrote it and he took it to *The New Yorker.* He came back. "They're going to print it." I said, "That's terrific." Then I said, "How is it going to be signed?" He said, "It's going to be signed Harold Buck." I said, "But, Buckie, I wrote that." He said, "Well—" I said, "You go back and tell them I wrote the story." So he went back and he said, "They don't use double bylines but they'll combine them." So the April 26th *New Yorker*, I think '47, has a story by Harold Bagdikian Buck.

04-00:22:04
Rubens: So that was your first story. And then I don't see another separate story until you publish in *The Reporter* in 1954, about McCarthy and Hunt's *Facts Forum.*

04-00:22:33
Bagdikian: Oh, yes. H.L. Hunt of Texas, whose son is now big in the oil business, was the richest man in America and he had started a national network of speakers for most cities of any size. It was called *Facts Forum* and the speakers would talk about civic issues. But they were all right-wingers and they all had a line that they were given to stress. So I recorded them and did a story on *Facts Forum*, his organization.

04-00:23:24
Rubens: And you submitted it to *The Reporter*. So what I'm asking is during that period that you were a reporter for the *Providence Journal*, you're also a freelance writer.

04-00:23:40
Bagdikian: Yes. A lot of that stuff got into other magazines.

04-00:23:43
Rubens: Yes, yes. That's why you're in such a good shape when you go to Europe, because you have outlets, journals in which you had published.

04-00:23:53
Bagdikian: Right. And a lot of those series that were reproduced in pamphlets.

04-00:24:23
Rubens: While in Europe, you had the chance to travel to the Middle East.

04-00:24:23
Bagdikian: I'd first gone through the Middle East on my own, and then when the war broke out, I was on the last plane, on El Al to Israel after the Egyptian War started. And when I got in, I was at a briefing. Briefings by government officials are always the same. They have flip charts and they always show the good part of whatever they're briefing on. And I was bored with it, trying to get away, and noticed a man opposite me in the briefing room. He saw I was disgusted with that, too. Turns out that he was an Israeli but he had been the official photographer on the archeological digs in the Negev Desert by international archeologists. His name was Beno Rothenberg. So he knew the desert completely. He had a jeep, he had an Uzi and he had a 45-caliber pistol. He said, "That's for you." I said, "I won't touch it. I'm in civilian clothes and if I've got a gun on me, that means I'm a spy, and I don't want a gun."

We broke a lot of stories, including one that was censored because the French came in to help the Israeli's. First of all, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal and France and Britain began bombing it. And the State Department told them to stop, because they didn't want any one of the countries to have control of the canal. And I was in the desert then and I could see the French bombs falling around the Suez Canal before they were stopped. But with this man whose book I have, Beno Rothenberg, the photographer, we traveled all over the Negev. We were with an Israeli tank corps. We got within ten kilometers of where the French bombed an Israeli camp by mistake. We got there just afterward. Everything was subject to the censor and it was the first dispatch where he said, "I'm very sorry, Ben. I can't let this through."

04-00:27:35
Rubens: Who was the censor? Who did the censor work for?

04-00:27:37
Bagdikian: An Israeli officer. Everything had to go through him. But they let everything through except for that. And I wrote about it afterwards, after I left Israel.

When I got back to Providence, the *Journal* asked me to take over the Washington bureau and I did. It was a two-man bureau, one for the afternoon paper, one for the morning paper. Then I found that the publisher of my paper had died and was replaced by a man who married into the owning family. He was simply a playboy. And he would say, "My wife would like a sixteenth-century Italian table which you can get at such and such a store," and I

figured, I got to be careful here because he's going to make me his errand boy. I wrote back and said, "I'm sorry. I don't have time to do it because I've got a backup of stories I got to file." And I called my editor and said, "Listen, he wants me to be buying furniture for his wife." He said, "Well, try it just this once." I said, "No, I've a bottom drawer where I put all of his orders." When I was leaving for Washington, this playboy said, "Now, when I want you to report on the attorney general, I don't want you to say Attorney General Robert Kennedy. It's Bobby. Just say Bobby. Bobby Kennedy. I don't want you to say it." But I just simply ignored him.

He also said he wanted me to do a special story on the thirty-ninth anniversary of J. Edgar Hoover's being the FBI Chief. And I said to my editor, "That's crazy. Why thirty-ninth anniversary?" He said, "Do me a favor. Do that. Get it out of the way. He's been nagging me and nagging me." I said, "Okay." So I went into it and find out, among other things, that when Roosevelt realized, just before the war ended, that we didn't have a foreign intelligence service, he asked four people to write "eyes-only" memos on how to establish an international American intelligence service. It was really the beginnings of the CIA. Wild Bill [William Joseph] Donovan was one of the big generals in the war who started this. There were three others.

Wild Bill had been with the OSS during the war. He knew that J. Edgar Hoover, who hated Roosevelt, would get the [memo to the] *Chicago Tribune*, which also hated Roosevelt. He wrote each of the four memos in slightly different language. And sure enough, a few days later, *The Chicago Tribune* said, "FDR plans to spy on Americans." These were supposed to be "eyes-only." That's the highest level of secrecy in government. You don't even show it to your wife. And so there was a story and it was Hoover's version that got into *The Chicago Tribune*. Hoover got so angry at me when I wrote that it was his version that he asked every police department in the United States to look through their files to find anything they had on me. Later, under the Freedom of Information Act, I got my papers and there was a clipping of the story I did on Hoover leaking a secret, and on the clipping, in Hoover's handwriting, it said, "Never give anything to this man." It went out to the whole FBI system. That memo was signed simply "H."

04-00:33:48
Rubens: Congratulations. You did your job. But let's hold off on talking more about your experiences in Washington, because I want you to talk about the series called "We Went South." Because you wrote that in 1957 when you came back from being in Europe for a year and before you go to Washington.

04-00:35:33
Bagdikian: I think so. They called Jim Rhea and me in to travel together in the South to see what would happen to a black and white traveling together. We were such good friends, I said, "You mean you want me to travel with that nigger?" and we both laughed, imitating what would happen in the South.

04-00:36:01
Rubens: Say who Jim Rhea is. How long had he been working for the *Providence Journal*?

04-00:36:05
Bagdikian: He had been working for them five or ten years. At the time, only the Minneapolis *Tribune* and the *Journal* had black reporters doing regular coverage and not just in the black community. At that time, the federalized interstate transportation was integrated. You could not separate races on an interstate bus or train during that period. But the minute you left an interstate thing, like a train or Greyhound bus, you could be separated. First we flew to Washington together, stayed at the Mayflower together, had a big argument because he thought that would be the end of segregation and I said, "No, it'll take a long time." But then we got on the plane and landed in Memphis. And as we got off the plane, there were two lines. One was marked white, the other, colored. And we separated there. And so in the South—

04-00:37:38
Rubens: Whose idea was this story? How had this come about that the two of you would go together?

04-00:37:44
Bagdikian: The executive editor and the city editor.

04-00:37:51
Rubens: Okay. And this was shortly after the Little Rock Arkansas incidents?

04-00:37:55
Bagdikian: Well, first we covered the Little Rock school integration and it was supposed to go very smoothly but there was a riot and they started beating up on blacks. So Eisenhower sent in the 101st Airborne Division. We were in New Orleans and I got a call from the *Providence Journal* saying, "They've had a riot, you've got to go back to Little Rock, but Jim can't go because they're beating up on blacks." Well, first of all, New Orleans was terribly segregated. There were white cabs and black cabs, white restaurants, black restaurants. So to get a cab, when it was raining hard, one of us would stand in the shadows and then when a cab stopped we'd rush into the backseat and shut the door. In a restaurant, we'd go to a black restaurant and the waitress would come to me and say, "I'm sorry, Sir. I can't serve you." And I'd say, "I'm colored." "Oh, that's all right, then," and they'd serve. And we operated that way.

When there was a riot in Little Rock and the editor in Providence said, "I want you to go back but Jim can't go back because we don't want anybody hurt." So I said, "Jim, I've got to go back and they say you can't." He was very angry. And then he got a telephone call from his mother and he came back and was flushed. I said, "Are you all right, Jim?" and he shouted, " It's the same thing she said to me when I was in Korea and now she's saying it in my own goddamn country," and he took his bourbon glass and threw it in the tiled

bathroom. It hit the tile in the bathroom and smashed all over. I remember he was enraged. It was a terrible moment.

04-00:40:19
Rubens: How long had you been traveling when that came about? He must have had to suppress a lot of rage at other times.

04-00:40:26
Bagdikian: Well, we had traveled about a month.

04-00:40:32
Rubens: Had you known him very well?

04-00:40:35
Bagdikian: Oh, yes. We were very good friends. We went to parties together, sometimes at his house, sometimes at other people's houses. No, it was a very good newsroom that way, and Providence was integrated.

04-00:40:45
Rubens: And so that's quite a telling story.

04-00:41:05
Bagdikian: Yes. As a matter of fact, we would have to separate periodically and come together periodically. Bobby Kennedy had integrated public places. If you had an ice cream stand, you couldn't discriminate. So I was sitting in a car by an ice cream parlor in my rented car. Some black kids were going to try to integrate this soda fountain, the soda shop and said to me, "Would you mind just sitting there in your car and watching to see what happens?" So I sat there and a cop came over, said, "Washington?"—obviously meaning FBI—and I said "Yes." So nothing happened.

04-00:42:40
Rubens: Now, you went back to Monroe, Louisiana, where you had been stationed during the war.

04-00:42:47
Bagdikian: Yes, I did. I had a good neighbor, Tim Smith. We used to go fishing together in the bayous when I lived there. And we would argue about integration. He would say, "Look, I think they should treat blacks decently but they are different people. They aren't developed the way white people are." And I'd argue with him that there's no scientific evidence of that. We'd argue but we'd go fishing together, catching big ugly gar. Then afterward, it must have been ten years later, I went back to Monroe. And I visited him. He still lived there and he was very happy to see me. We had a wonderful dinner together at his house and I asked, "You still think that they shouldn't ride the buses?" "No, that's silly." He had a plumbing supply business. "My foreman is a black man. He's a wizard. He can do things that none of my other people can do and we have dinner together and lunch together." And I said, "Jim, that's a big change. You once told me they had different brains." "No, I never felt that way," he said. Many Southerners had selective memory loss.

04-00:45:26

Rubens: Tell me, did you notice anything different in the South from when you were stationed there? It was almost thirteen years later. You're going in 1957 and you hadn't been there since 1945. Were there other changes that you noticed?

04-00:45:45

Bagdikian: Yes. What had happened in the South was that cotton had been mechanized, and Northern industry had moved south. It wasn't all agricultural any more. Northern companies were establishing factories. I remember talking to one CEO of a big plant who was making a decision where to move, Nashville or Memphis or Birmingham. He said, "We are not going to establish a factory where they're throwing bombs at each other." So it got known in the South that if you're going to have segregation and tensions, you're going to lose industry. Remember the [four little] girls who were killed by a bomb in Birmingham? That's when the South began making heroes of the leaders of integration, but slowly. But as they got industrialized, they became, over the decades, much more like the North. And there's more segregation now in Chicago than there is in Birmingham.

04-00:46:16

Rubens: Yes. Although there's the phenomenon of re-segregation. You say in that piece that there were plenty of people you met who weren't like your friend who now accepted it. There were people who seemed to do it with resignation, because it was the economic as well as the political forces that forced them to integrate.

04-00:47:58

Bagdikian: Yes. But as the next generations came along, they were more educated. Black kids would not necessarily go just to black colleges. They were interested in becoming economically developed. As I said, industry said they were not going to establish plants where they had to solve a terrible social problem. All the pressures were to restrain segregation. Then, also, the South moved north [the Great Migration]. Then there was more segregation in New York and Chicago than there was in Nashville and Birmingham.

04-00:49:01

Rubens: So how long were you in the South? How long did that series take?

04-00:49:09

Bagdikian: A month. I've been in the South alone on many other stories. For example, I did a story for *The Saturday Evening Post* on blacks moving from the South to the North and I traveled with them. They would travel on the Illinois Central, with a straw suitcase with a rope around it or they would travel in a Greyhound bus and I did too. There was one family I lived with. Walter Austin—he was a wonderful man. I've got a copy of the story upstairs. It was reproduced by *The Saturday Evening Post*; they got so many requests for it. And it's in some anthologies. But I was with him and I ate with him. He said, "You can't eat at our table." I said, "Well, if you're going to eat, I'd like to eat with you." So they would shut the door and we'd be in the kitchen table and

we'd have pork, which was very popular in the South, from the pig they'd raised.

Walter Austin was a sharecropper and he had his own small plot and a hog or two, but he worked on the owner's large plantation. He would buy at the company store on credit and at the end of the year they would tell him whether he owed them money or they owed him money. But he finally decided to move north. When the UAW went down South to try to organize, there was a bitter Southern reaction against the union and the man who owned the shack that Walter Austin lived in said he had to move because he had an organizer living in his house. That was me. And so I went down and I said, "Excuse me. I'm the man you say is a union organizer." "Yes." "I know who you are. You rented a car in Jackson. You took it back so you'd fool us. You took another car." As a matter of fact, I took it back because it had a lousy engine and I didn't want to have a failure in Yazoo City. So he said, "You did this," and then he named every place I'd been, because the state police in Mississippi was like a military force. They recorded every place I stayed and they were right. "And so we know all about you. You're no magazine writer. You're a union organizer." And I said, "You are doing Walter a great disservice." As I was leaving I saw a bunch of *Saturday Evening Posts*. I said, "Excuse me. Could I show you something in there?" He said, "Go ahead." I opened up the masthead and I said, "See that name there?" "Yes." I took out my Washington driver's license. "That's me. I'm not a union organizer. I'm a writer." He didn't say anything. As we walked back to my car, I said, "I think you've done an injustice to Walter." He said, "Well, I'm not thinking now what I was thinking an hour ago." So I told Walter that the man said he could stay and Walter went down to the manager's house and said, "Captain—" Blacks always called the boss captain—I had to get him not to call me captain—he said, "I'm moving." And the boss said, "You don't have to, Walter. I know that I was wrong. You can stay." And Walter said, "Captain, I lived here twenty years. I never told you a lie but you called me a liar. I'm leaving."

04-00:54:14
Rubens: And he did.

04-00:54:14
Bagdikian: And he did.

04-00:54:15
Rubens: And you went with him, didn't you?

04-00:54:17
Bagdikian: Yes. I had my car, plus they had a nephew who had moved to Chicago earlier, and he came down. And it was a great party as he left. They were selling off whatever they owned. In a very good year they had bought a deep freeze so they could freeze their meat after they slaughtered it. They were auctioning it all off, and then we drove north. As we were about thirty miles from the

Mississippi River and his house, and as we were driving over the Mississippi River, he said, "Oh, my goodness. Look how big that is. I've been living within twenty miles of that river and I never saw it before." And then he moved to Springfield where he had a daughter, who had gone earlier, and I visited him about a month later and he was washing dishes in a restaurant. And I said, "Walter, how are you?" And he said, "I do not like what I'm doing." The women all got jobs right away in a laundry, big flatware laundry—the men got all menial jobs.

04-00:55:52
Rubens: Did you ever see him again?

04-00:55:54
Bagdikian: Yes. I kept in touch with him all the time and later with Walter Austin, Jr. I called up and I said, "My wife and I would like to visit you." And the son said, "Well, I don't know. I'll let you know if it's okay," but he never let me know.

04-00:56:15
Rubens: Let me ask you about your writing process, literally. Did you write the series for the newspaper when you got back or were you sending up reports while you were there?

04-00:57:02
Bagdikian: I kept notes as I went. I didn't have that good a memory. Then I'd type them all out. Because as you type them out, when you write you do kind of homemade shorthand. But when you go to type it out, you write the real sentence and then it comes back to you. When I got back to Providence, I'd sit down and decide what would be the individual stories that had some sequence with each of the other ones and the one Jim wrote.

04-00:57:44
Rubens: In the publication you alternated. One was published with your by-line, the next one under Jim's.

04-00:57:53
Bagdikian: Yes. And there were parts I left out. For instance, the business about his throwing his bourbon glass.

04-00:58:09
Rubens: All right. I'm going to have to stop because we've come to the end of the tape. Thank you so much.

[End of Audio File 4]]

Interview #3: June 1, 2010
[Begin Audio File 5]

05-00:00:00
Rubens: This is our third interview and it's June 1st. You write about how newspapers changed as a result of World War II and how they changed even more in the 1960s, especially how they became more profitable. I'm wondering if for a backdrop to your personal history during the sixties, you would comment on those big changes.

05-00:00:36
Bagdikian: World War II, of course, made a lot of papers which had been largely frivolous somewhat more serious because the whole country was concerned with the big war. After the war, you had, in a way, a new audience. These were sixteen million military people who came out of the war, which was not a frivolous experience for them. Additionally, and this is very important, and I think it's one of the biggest changes in American society in the last century, was that the government gave every G.I. four years of college. And that changed the nature of the society. It meant for the first time working-class people who had never thought that they could go to college became educated in college and that meant that the media they're interested in change. Newspapers had much more a mature and serious audience.

The newspapers reflected to the new audience in different ways. The differences largely were based on who owned them and how much they respected their audience and the purpose for which they were putting out papers. A great many proprietors of newspapers did it only to make money as quickly and easily as possible. A lot of people were attracted to it because you have a basis of power. You decide what the community and the country will see the next day, about what's happening in the world, and that gives you power. Some people did not really take that very seriously. What they wanted was something quick and easy or based largely on popular individuals. There were a great many columns representing different politics, but on the whole mostly conservative. Papers were, on the whole, with a few exceptions, quite conservative, not only in the news that they selected but in the commentators they selected. The popular commentators were Fulton Lewis, Westbrook Pegler or gossip columnists like Walter Winchell. It was a time when the country was somewhat more prosperous. They had money to spend, so papers wanted high circulation for advertising revenue.

And also the new media were just beginning. Radio had been very important, of course, but television was beginning to come in and it was a phenomenon. Since TV was brand new, the differences among television stations and communities that had TV stations were enormous. Some would, for example, put an enormous emphasis on the technology. They would want a weather person to have a kind of two-way transparent chalkboard in which they could say, "In Oklahoma today there will be no rain but there will be storms in

southern Illinois." Lots of that kind of programming. For the first time, women began to be hired, because being on camera, the more attractive they were, presumably, the more people would look at them.

The newspapers were still the core of news and public information. The better papers began emerging quite clearly. There were papers like *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The Baltimore Sun,* Louisville *Courier Journal,* Saint Louis *Post Dispatch*. There was, of course, the bible of the trade, *The New York Times*, but it was much duller than it is today. Mostly, it was considered the paper of record. What the people with high titles in politics and corporate life said yesterday became, in a way, what would be in *The New York Times*. But they were, nevertheless, the most influential paper. Others copied some of what they did, but mostly they were the establishment paper.

05-00:07:36
Rubens: Where did your newspaper fit in?

05-00:07:39
Bagdikian: Well, after I moved to Providence, Rhode Island, after a couple of years in New York after the war, I had a couple of friends who influenced me. I had moved to Providence before the war and I came back to Providence and I had two friends there that worked for the local paper. It was a very good local paper and they said, "They would like to have you come and work for them." So I did. I had a family to support and I didn't want to work in New York. Eventually I began doing some of the most played-up stories in the paper. They liked the versatility. I could write a funny story, I could write a serious story, I could do an investigative story. And they had a publisher who was serious about newspapers, and so I would be given time off to do stories and series in great depth.

05-00:09:06
Rubens: Let's talk about one of the first series that you did at that paper, which was the "Pitch Men of the Press." You looked at four commentators: Walter Winchell, Drew Pearson, Fulton Lewis, and Westbrook Pegler. How did the idea for the series originate?

05-00:09:41
Bagdikian: Well, it was a combination of what the publisher knew I could do—he had his standards, which were very high—and of what a good newspaper should be. And he was disgusted with most of the newspapers. I would be given one or two or sometimes three months to do a series in-depth about something having to do with what was going on in the country. It could be nuclear power, it could be the new national security system. It could be on a number of subjects. But they would come out in a long series, usually put in pamphlet form afterward, because people would write and want the whole collection. I also began being asked to testify before Congressional committees that were looking into some of these things. So I developed contacts there. So before I moved to Washington, I had lots of contacts in Washington from whom I

could gain access to committee reports and to the people who were very high in politics who knew what was going on. I wasn't bothered the way most of the press corps was with getting something from an official with a high title.

A lot of the press corps also had very little initiative. They went to the morning press conference, filed a story for the afternoon and there would be a release in the afternoon. They'd file that but they wouldn't do much else. There were some reporters, and we got to be friends—the ones who went into subjects in some depth. There were half a dozen of us —where separately we would be looking into something in some depth, not produce any stories until they were all done, and then they would come out in rather long and deep form. Occasionally we would be partners on a story where it turned out that each of us had different kinds of sources that were needed. So that that was a time of change, of the emergence of serious journalism in a way that it had not been before. Before journalism was serious, it was stodgy, and if it wasn't serious it was flashy.

05-00:13:13
Rubens: So when you did this series on the pitchmen, when you looked at these four columnists in depth—actually, three columnists, because one of them was a radio broadcaster—

05-00:13:27
Bagdikian: That was the publisher's idea. They had a broadcasting station that was owned by the paper. They had them record the commentators on the air for fifteen weeks and then they turned over to me the tapes of the fifteen weeks. And so I would work with this and do something with some detail and depth on each of these people.

05-00:14:04
Rubens: I see it as a piece that launches your career as a media critic. You become known as an expert in the field, of being able to criticize and critique the media. And it seemed to me that was one of the first big pieces that you did in 1951. You win a Peabody Award for it.

05-00:14:28
Bagdikian: Yes. But it's interesting. The professional journals that were devoted to the press, like *Editor and Publisher*, *Television Magazine*, they were generally either uninterested or hostile, because their biggest customers and sources were the conventional big newspapers, not the ones who were doing these long, in-depth articles. So that when I'd get a call from one of the magazines whose business it was to report on the American press, I knew it would be hostile, but I'd answer their questions. One time, I said, "Look, I know what you're going to do. You will say that I'm a so-called critic who never has a good thing to say about the press—so if you want to do it, do it on your own, but don't waste my time, because you're too predictable." After a while they changed, but only after five or ten years, because the whole world was changing.

05-00:16:02
Rubens: Is there anything you want to say particularly about that pitchmen? Walter Winchell was talking to an audience of twenty-five million people every Sunday, Westbrook Pegler had an audience of forty-five million in the print columns. You were taking on people with huge audiences.

05-00:16:36
Bagdikian: Well, Walter Winchell is a good example. I was writing about somebody and Walter Winchell had made a comment about that person because he was a night club reporter, and he had in his column something interesting that he'd picked up by a person in one of these night club dinners they went to. I called that person, they said, "Yes, Walter was right." A few days later, Walter Winchell referred in his column to something like, "As the first great reporter in Providence, Ben Bagdikian said . . ." Then later on, I was doing analysis of commentators, I found out Walter Winchell would publish anything J. Edgar Hoover ever said, including things that are absolutely nutty. And I said something about that and the next Walter Winchell column reference to me was, "As that bad-tempered reporter in Providence who claims to be a critic said . . ." Very negative.

05-00:18:10
Rubens: He was reading you.

05-00:18:13
Bagdikian: Sure. But he was an example of a frivolous reporter. He was a night club reporter.

05-00:18:22
Rubens: You point out in your article that he was encouraging Americans to get involved in the war in Korea—that wasn't so frivolous.

05-00:18:31
Bagdikian: Yes, because militarism and aggression was usually part of the political agenda of most of the popular conservative columnists, because they thought the United States should have demonstrated military power. They admired the generals. They didn't know much about strategy or tactics or world relations. They were conservative and militaristic.

05-00:19:22
Rubens: Was that true of Drew Pearson? He was somewhat sympathetic to the New Deal and you write that he had a forty-seven percent accuracy rate. You were looking really not so much at their influence as much as how accurate they were. Did you pick the four people as having some kind of significant influence on the American population?

05-00:19:48
Bagdikian: Oh, yes, of course.

05-00:19:50
Rubens: Fulton Lewis today I don't think is so well known.

05-00:20:00
Bagdikian: Not today, but he was then. Many of these people aren't known at all today, partly because of the passage of time, but he was a very glib and eloquent speaker. He had a serious audience.

05-00:20:23
Rubens: He was pretty conservative.

05-00:20:25
Bagdikian: Very conservative. They were all conservative. And that's why I couldn't find a paper reporter who wasn't consistently conservative. And I am liberal. I am a progressive but I didn't let that affect my judgment of information. But it did influence what I was interested in doing, because if I saw what I thought were social problems, political errors by officialdom, I would go after that.

05-00:21:07
Rubens: Okay, I just wanted to give some airtime to that article because I realized we didn't say very much about it and it's the first media critique that you make and it's a nice piece.

05-00:21:25
Bagdikian: Well, it was a kind of swear word for a long time, "media critic."

05-00:21:27
Rubens: Why so?

05-00:21:29
Bagdikian: You weren't supposed to criticize. And the movie reporters were the heroes and the dramatic actors and they won the girl at the end of the program. They won the plaudits and the audience in the movies. Reporters in movies were always stereotypes. They were people who sat around a table smoking, waiting for a call from the police headquarters informing them that they just made an arrest of some criminal. And they'd pick up the phones and call or they'd run out, but they spent most of their time in the movies depicted as people just sitting and smoking around a round table with a telephone handy.

05-00:22:29
Rubens: You are concerned, in your series about these commentators, that they are appealing to emotion rather than addressing themselves to hard facts. That's a theme that you have throughout the series.

05-00:22:42
Bagdikian: Well, they have a political sermon to preach and they preached it.

05-00:22:52
Rubens: Okay. Well, I think last time where we left off is you come to Washington in 1961 as a bureau chief.

05-00:23:04
Bagdikian: The *Providence Journal* had a bureau in Washington, a two-man bureau. They asked me to be bureau chief. One chief, two Indians. And so I moved to

Washington and that was very interesting to me. For example, as a reflection of the values of that time, the press club was men-only. The bar had a sign, "Men Only." And if a woman stuck her head in by mistake, the men would screech as though they'd seen a devil. And then when they had a big national or international speaker in the big hall of the press building, the women reporters were permitted, but like an Orthodox synagogue, they had to sit in a balcony separate from the main floor. They could not ask questions but they could sit there and watch, but it had to be in a balcony. It was both amusing and a reflection of how parochial most of the reporters were. There were sometimes interesting people. They were fun. But they and their papers usually weren't very serious.

05-00:24:51
Rubens: Now, of course, 1961 is when John F. Kennedy takes office. And it's always been alleged that it was like a breath of fresh air coming into Washington. I'm wondering if you have some observations about that change.

05-00:25:07
Bagdikian: That I remember very well. First of all, John Kennedy came from Boston. It was part of our circulation area. Where the Boston papers were pretty bad, we were always interested in reporting in Boston, although we covered Rhode Island like a blanket. So my paper said, "Why don't you cover the Kennedy campaign. This is going to be an interesting campaign." So I remember being with him when he campaigned in New Hampshire. New Hampshire has old mill towns and there were a lot of French Canadians. So he would always talk about his wife, Jacqueline Bouvier.

Then on inauguration day, I remember very well, it was one of the worst blizzards Washington had ever had. The snow was about four feet deep. I had taken a room on Massachusetts Avenue and I was walking through the snow to the inauguration. The bridges across Rock Creek Park were jammed with limousines stalled in the snow. I got down to the Capitol. I'm a good elbower in a crowd. I can get through a crowd towards the front fairly easily without being too boorish. I lead with my elbows. The inauguration—I remember very clearly Robert Frost reading a poem and the frost coming out of his mouth. Then John Kennedy, this handsome young man who took over from a not-very scintillating predecessor as President—I remember his speech in which he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you." And he had something very important, a man I knew a little bit, Ted Sorenson, as his speechwriter. Sorenson was a Unitarian and I'd been active in the Unitarian church. But I knew him mostly as John Kennedy's speechwriter.

There was always a big question that my publisher wanted me to find out about. There were rumors that John Kennedy had an injury to his back which could possibly interrupt his Presidency. And the health of candidates running for the Presidency has always been an issue. It was then, it is today. And I looked into it and he did have treatment in Florida after he got out of the

military service for an ailment at the base of his spine. But I couldn't find any hard evidence from a doctor who would say that, "Yes, he had this treatment but there's no way of telling what his future will be." So I didn't do the definitive story. But it certainly did not hamper his very impressive sexual activity.

05-00:29:30
Rubens: Did the press corps know about that? Did you know about that?

05-00:29:34
Bagdikian: Everybody knew about it. He had women visiting him at noontime.

05-00:29:40
Rubens: This, of course, has become public knowledge in the last twenty or so years but it was not public knowledge at the time. The press shielded him.

05-00:29:51
Bagdikian: All of Washington knew that. And there would be some references to a lot of young women. But on the whole, there wasn't as much energy put into the President's private life if the President didn't want it. Now, I did do a story on Jacqueline Bouvier. They had a summer place in Newport, Rhode Island, which I know very well. I went to the house to see if I could talk to—she was reported to be there—Ms. Bouvier, and I was told by the butler—I've forgotten whether she was not available or not there. But I did notice they had a gravel driveway, sort of oval, that went around to the front of the house to the street. And I drove my car to the front door, asked my question, got my answer, went back to the car. And as I was driving away, in my rear vision mirror, I could see that the groundskeeper was raking my car tracks out of the gravel as I went. So they lived a very meticulous and a very high-priced life, and she was used to that. There has been criticism about her being the rich girl with all these fancy clothes, but that began to change, especially after the assassination. Her behavior with the children was so exemplary that she then became a very popular figure.

05-00:32:02
Rubens: Interesting. One more question about the silence that the press maintained about Kennedy's womanizing. That was just the values of the day, that you just did not report that kind of news?

05-00:32:22
Bagdikian: Yes. Washington is like a moon. It's a globe in which things important inside the Beltway are not so important outside or become the daily interest in the Beltway, but are only of periodic interest outside. And one didn't report those things very much. Publishers probably would hesitate to print them, except for very hostile publishers. There were some who would do it. There's one in Manchester, New Hampshire, an especially hostile, angry conservative, and he did. But not very many.

05-00:33:19
Rubens: So how long did you remain the bureau chief for the *Journal*?

05-00:33:27
Bagdikian: I'm guessing two years.

05-00:33:45
Rubens: How did that relationship come to an end?

05-00:33:50
Bagdikian: I had had in Washington a very good friend, Don Oberdorfer, who had gone to work for the new revised *Saturday Evening Post*. He and I had been good friends before we were ever reporters. I've forgotten how I knew him, but I knew his children and he knew mine. He had gone to *The Saturday Evening Post* and he liked it because of the new owners and the liveliness and some of the people we knew who were this new generation. He said, "Look, why don't you come to work here?" So I went over there and talked to them and Bill Emerson was the editor. He was a sort of wild acting man, but they also had some very good working editors. There was Otto Friedrich, Don McKinney, and Tom Congdon. These were the three young very bright people. They're the kinds of people who graduate with honors from whatever college they went to and they knew a lot about public affairs.

05-00:35:34
Rubens: And where was the magazine based?

05-00:35:41
Bagdikian: It was on the sixth floor of the Tishman building, in New York. I began getting assignments from them and they gave me all the time I needed. And so that's when I did some of the stories that ended up in books or anthologies, because they would let me take the time I needed. That was really a wonderful thing. If I was going to talk about the migration of blacks to the north, I would travel with the blacks and I would be on the trains and the buses and so forth to the north. I'd get to know them. I would talk to the scholars who had studied this from a standpoint of history and scholarship. But I always, as a reporter, did both things. I'd look at what is known in scholarship and the past publications, but I always wanted to be a part of the audience or a part of the population affected by the policies of these people at the top.

Then when I went back to the people at the top, I had quite different questions for them, because I'd talked to the people. These politicians said, "I have done so much for the people of X." And I'd go to the people of X and they would tell me, "Show me," and I'd live with them and see the gap between what was said and what was experienced, in some cases. So that's when I began that cycle of the combination of serious study of an issue, speaking to the best authorities of it, then living with the people affected by the policymakers.

05-00:38:11
Rubens: So that was your method and *Saturday Evening Post* gave you the time to put that into practice. Were you a feature writer? What was your contractual relationship with them?

05-00:38:28
Bagdikian: I had a very powerful agent. His office took care of everything.

05-00:38:38
Rubens: What was his name?

05-00:38:38
Bagdikian: Sterling Lord. I think the Sterling Lord Agency may still exist. But he was very powerful and he was interested in books, mostly books, and articles. But he was very tough on percentages and advances and so forth.

05-00:39:02
Rubens: Now, you had written for *Time* magazine before you left the *Journal.* You had done an occasional article?

Bagdikian: I was a stringer for *Time*, covering New England for possible stories or whatever they asked me to do. They liked what I sent them, and after awhile they offered me a job in New York editing their Press Section, which at the time was superficial or silly and within journalism circles was often ridiculed. They clearly decided to change that. They had me come to New York and gave me the royal treatment. The managing editor and his superior took me to lunch at fashionable Toots Shor, which was a New York landmark at the time. I thought both men were frivolous and had unattractive personalities. After lunch and a conversation with them, they offered me a job editing the Press Section. I would move to New York, and since *Time* came out on Monday, I would work weekends doing the final touches for the magazine. It would have been a very large increase in the pay I was getting at the *Providence Journal*. When I asked the managing editor if he worked weekends and then had Monday and Tuesday off, when he saw his children or family, he said, "Oh, before my kids went off to college, I'd see them Monday or Tuesday nights if they stayed up to see me for a half hour or so before they went to bed. We had vacations together." They suggested I return home and think it over and tell them what salary I expected.

In a taxi back to the airport, I had a talkative cab driver and I told him I'd been offered a job in New York. What did he think? He said, "Nah, if the commies drop an A-bomb it will be right in the middle of Times Square. If I had money, I'd move to the Bronx where it'll be safer." After a couple of days at home, I called *Time* and told them if I took the job what salary I expected. They said it was much higher than they pay new hires, but they'd have to ask the proprietor, presumably Mr. Luce, and would call me back in a day or so. The real sticking point for me was that "weekend" at *Time* being Monday and Tuesday, which meant I'd see my kids only a few minutes every Monday and

Tuesday. In a few days, they did call and they said the proprietor said that it was too high a salary for a new hire, but that if all went well, I'd get that much in six months. I said no, thank you, they expressed regret, and that was that. I remember grabbing my wife and we danced around the living room in joy, "They said no. They said no."

05-00:42:41
Rubens: But you stayed in Washington. Did you like covering politics, following the stories of the day that were political?

05-00:42:50
Bagdikian: Every day, every Washington bureau got press releases from companies, from lobbyists, members of the Congress, members of the bureaucracy and there were people who did nothing but come through the Press Building corridors. The corridors had marble floors, so they could literally spin this PR release, stapled PR release, and it'd slide under the door and you'd collect them and there would be a stack at the end of the day about a foot high. You'd glance through them quickly because now and then there'd be something real. I had learned to scan very quickly and then throw them all away.

05-00:44:05
Rubens: But what made you stay in Washington once you went to work for *The Saturday Evening Post*? You didn't want to move back to Providence or New York? You liked being where you were?

05-00:44:15
Bagdikian: I had bought a house. I lived in a very nice part of Washington named Cleveland Park. It was in walking distance of downtown. It was in the middle of Rock Creek Park —very pleasant surroundings. I think, and other people have agreed with me, it's the best urban little village imaginable. And some of the streets weren't even paved. It had been preserved by people who wanted to keep it just the way it was.

05-00:44:56
Rubens: So this is the same time also that you develop the monthly column for the *Columbia Journalism Review*. How did that come about in 1961? How and why were you hired to write that?

05-00:45:14
Bagdikian: I knew the publisher of that because I had been to Columbia School of Journalism to look up records from time to time and I knew people there. And when they started putting out a monthly review they asked me if I would be a contributor. So I did and I contributed a piece every edition from the first one in 1961 until I left Washington for Santa Monica in '67.

05-00:45:53
Rubens: You're listed as the national correspondent; your column is called "Letter from Washington." Was it up to you to choose what you would cover?

05-00:46:07
Bagdikian: Yes. Now, occasionally they'd ask me to cover something specific, and if it was reasonable I'd do it. It usually was reasonable. I very much liked doing it and I liked the people who were editing the magazine at that point.

05-00:46:26
Rubens: Where did you literally write? You're now establishing yourself as an independent or freelance journalist. Is that what you would have called yourself in those days, 1961 to '67?

05-00:46:39
Bagdikian: Yes, I think so. I didn't have a contract with them, not with the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

05-00:46:48
Rubens: Did they pay well?

05-00:46:50
Bagdikian: They didn't pay terribly well. They paid, and every little bit helped, but they didn't pay the way *The Saturday Evening Post* paid, or at the level of the advances I got from some book publishers.

05-00:47:06
Rubens: Okay. Well, we're going to get to that in just a minute. How did you structure your time as a freelance journalist? Did you rent an office?

05-00:47:18
Bagdikian: I did have an office in the Press Building; I used the Press Building office because it was handy to offices in Washington. But I did most of my writing in my house. I had an office there and I spent a lot of time in that office. My study-office had files and a typewriter.

05-00:47:42
Rubens: And so the deadline that was most present would govern what you'd work on?

05-00:47:53
Bagdikian: And then by Western Union I would send my stories in. And the stories had to be typed letter-perfect. You do that with manuscripts. And so there was a woman who did nothing but typing manuscripts. So I'd take it to her, she'd type it overnight, and then I would take it to Western Union.

05-00:48:24
Rubens: At *The Saturday Evening Post* did you work with one editor or did it depend on what the story was?

05-00:48:30
Bagdikian: It depended on the story but it was mostly that I worked with the top editors, Don McKinney, Otto Friedrich and Tom Congdon.

05-00:48:46
Rubens: Did that require you going up to New York or could you do most of your business by Western Union and phone?

05-00:49:05
Bagdikian: I would also take it in because then we'd talk about it.

05-00:49:10
Rubens: So you did have meetings in New York?

05-00:49:13
Bagdikian: Oh, yes, regular meetings. You'd have a meeting every issue and in magazines they have a storyboard. So there's the present issue and all the stories are listed on a blackboard. There's a blackboard next to it with the next issue after that and these things are always being shifted back and forth. Because if your story is scheduled for June and then a very timely and hot story comes in, they say, "We're moving your story to July." And you fight it because you don't want it moved but that happens in magazines all the time. They have to move them around as stories have timeliness.

05-00:50:10
Rubens: How would you characterize *The Saturday Evening Post* at that time?

05-00:50:16
Bagdikian: A wonderful magazine.

05-00:50:17
Rubens: What was its audience and what was its range?

05-00:50:22
Bagdikian: The range covered the current politics, interesting events, interesting people, but substantial stories. No little bits and pieces. When you worked on a story, you worked on it seriously and long.

05-00:50:42
Rubens: One of your first stories was in February of 1962. It was called "The New Lyndon Johnson." Prescient. Before he—

05-00:50:56
Bagdikian: That was an experience in itself.

05-00:51:02
Rubens: You remember that?

05-00:51:02
Bagdikian: Yes, I do, and so did he. Lyndon Johnson was a towering man. He could act. He could intimidate. He could be the friendliest person in the world. He could be cold as ice. I went to see him and I knew his press secretary, who was a neighbor of mine in Washington, George Reedy, and I said, "George, I've got an assignment to do a profile of the President," and he says, "Well, I'll ask him." Then he came back and said, "He doesn't want a profile done. He's had

a little embarrassment because his fundraiser had maintained a house." It was almost a house of ill repute. It's where lobbyists could go and have a great time anytime of the day or night. My friend Don Oberdorfer and I did a story on that, on this lobbyist who ran this house and ran everything else. And then if you wanted something done you had to go see this lobbyist. Bobby was the man to see.

But when I went to see him, he remembered that. I had my questions for him. One of the issues was a speech. John Kennedy had sent him to Berlin when the Berlin Wall was still up. And he had made a speech saying he pledged the honor and the loyalty—a standard phrase of the United States—to the independence of West Germany. And it got big play in the news because it was considered the Vice-President making a commitment of the United States, presumably that might result in the country going to war. And did he do that just off the top of his head or was it prepared? Was it carefully vetted? And it was my job to find out in this story that I would write on this speech of his. So I asked him. He was so nervous. He was so touchy about being the Vice-President of John Kennedy. I said, "Did this get cleared by the White House first?" "I gave that speech," he said, "and I give my own speeches." I said, "Yes, but before you did, did you clear it with the White House?" He said, "I told you that I give my own speeches." I said, "Yes, sir, but did the White House see it?" Well, he then stood up. And when he stands up he's a very tall man. And he looks down on you like a death ray. And he said, "All right, god damn it, yes, he saw that before I gave it. Are you happy now?" He was angry.

That Christmas, at the annual Christmas party that the White House gave for the correspondents, I went to the White House in the afternoon in the Christmas season and there's the Marine band arrayed on the stairway in their red jackets playing nice Christmas music in the background, and there's the President and his aide and then Mrs. Johnson and her aide and so forth. And as each correspondent came up, the aide would whisper in the President's ear, "This is so and so from the such and such press." Lyndon said, "Glad to see you, Charlie," and shook his hand. And then when I came along, he just took my hand and just gave me this fifty-degree-below-zero look and passed me on. He remembered.

05-00:55:51
Rubens: That's a good story. And then there's another article that you do write in '62, "Conflict of Interest in Congress". That's with Don Oberdorfer in *Saturday Evening Post.* Do you remember that one?

05-00:56:15
Bagdikian: Yes, I do. We worked together a lot, sometimes in his house, sometimes in my house. It was about members of Congress who passed legislation in which they had a financial interest—for example, to get a stadium built for some local university in which the contractor would make sure that he got a few thousand dollars for that. That kind of conflict of interest, which sometimes

involved very big money. It was a very good story. We found all kinds of tricks where a member of Congress would be on a committee that handled, let's say, excise taxes and his law firm would have a New York office with all the partners, senior partners with his name on it. Right across the hall would be another office with the same names minus his. So someone said, "Gee, Congressman, I have a problem with this. I need someone who has some influence, can do something." He said, "Well, I can't do anything because my law office is involved, but try the office across the hall." So we did that. We were careful to go to those offices to double check on the two lists of names on the doors.

05-00:58:18
Rubens: This was exposé journalism.

[End Audio File 5]

[Begin Audio File 6]

06-00:00:00
Rubens: I was asking you about your contribution to the book *The Kennedy Circle*—you wrote a chapter on Ribicoff.

06-00:00:09
Bagdikian: That's not significant in the body of my work. But what it does bring to mind was that Abe Ribicoff said something I have always remembered. He said, "Now, I have just won a victory over an opponent. It was a very hard election fight but it is always important to remain friendly with your opponent. And I go to him and I visit him afterwards so it's not just *pro forma*. But it makes a big difference in how you are treated by your colleagues and how you feel about yourself." So it was a nice time with Ribicoff, but the article didn't amount to much.

06-00:01:11
Rubens: How many times did you interview him?

06-00:01:17
Bagdikian: With the research that I did, I guess it was a couple of times. It was in Connecticut.

06-00:01:27
Rubens: By then, he had assumed the position at Health, Education and Welfare. You didn't do it at his office?

06-00:01:38
Bagdikian: No, I didn't.

06-00:01:38
Rubens: I found the article interesting. Was it your agent who got you the work or did you know the author of the book?

06-00:02:00
Bagdikian: I probably knew the editor of the book.

06-00:02:03
Rubens: I see that during this period the primary journals that you're writing for were *The Saturday Evening Post, The New York Times* Sunday magazine*, The New Republic*. Occasionally you wrote for *Harper's* or *The Nation.* Tell me about writing for *The New York Times*. You said that this was before it was a slick magazine?

06-00:02:32
Bagdikian: That's right. It was not a slick magazine. It had a regular format that really was a summary of the week's news by subject matter. And I knew the editor, who was a very idiosyncratic man. He would lie down on a couch he had in his office and he would talk to you as though he were God while you sat opposite his desk. He'd be lying there, talking about what a piece should be. But I was one of the very few people who got along with him. When I moved to Santa Monica he got in touch with me and asked, "What's Santa Monica like?" I said, "Well, it's a very beautiful place —beautiful beach with a lot of beautiful women." Two weeks later he was there on the beach walking around. I think he'd seen pretty beaches before.

06-00:04:11
Rubens: Do you remember his name?

06-00:04:16
Bagdikian: Lester Markel.

06-00:04:18
Rubens: But how were the stories generated? Would you have an idea and take it to him?

06-00:04:39
Bagdikian: Yes. Most of the time I'd pick the topic. They may have, from time to time, suggested it, but mostly I picked it. I would frequently use some institution in Washington as an example or choose an exemplar of a characteristic of Washington politics. For example, one of the new and more interesting museums that was built while I was there was the Museum of Science and Technology. As a child I'd always been interested in steam locomotives. They still had them when I was a kid and I'd go to the railroad station and watch them. And they had inside the Washington museum a big Southern Pacific locomotive—they had to move the locomotive in, and build the museum around it. And so, for example, I use that as an analogy of how legislation sometimes gets done—how things are proposed and legislated, put through the motions, when in fact everything's been decided at the start.

06-00:06:30
Rubens: You wrote a piece on the CIA, I think it was called "The Un-secretive Report." I didn't know if you were using that institution as an example of—

06-00:06:41
Bagdikian: Well, I had to read all the material that had been done in the reliable literature about the CIA, which was not a whole lot. I had known a couple of people in the CIA by accident and I knew, for example, when you got on a plane in and out of Washington and you sat next to someone and you started a conversation—I'd say, "Well, do you come to Washington often?" And one woman said, "Yes." I said, "What do you do there?" "I work for the government." "What part of the government?" "Just let's say I work for the government." So I knew she worked for the CIA. That was a euphemism for the CIA.

And then, since I was going to do the story, I told the CIA I'd like to come and visit them. And they said, "Well, we don't have visitors." But I pulled whatever strings I could and they did let me come down to Langley, to where the headquarters are. A person told me, "You're not going to learn much. They're going to walk you through the corridors and give you a handshake when you leave." Well, I was walking through the corridors and I realized if I'd been a spy I would have learned a few things. I saw men walking into a door saying, "Yellow fever shots given here." So I figured those people are going to the tropics someplace. I thought, "Well, if you did this long enough or hard enough, you'd learn some things."

And then a couple of journalist friends of mine did write a book about the CIA; you don't have to find out much before your book is noticed as one of the few about the agency. They were very concerned. They did notice some sources that were confidential and I was asked consulted: "Could you tell who any of these sources were?" I said, "Yes, I could guess pretty well when you named them." Like, the writer might name people who were students of intelligence and therefore knew about the CIA but were in the open. When you would say "the esteemed scholar John Smith," I knew he was a source. If you just said it without any adjective, I couldn't tell. But when I said, "I would guess that three of your main sources were X, Y, and Z," the man who was consulting me was stunned.

06-00:10:25
Rubens: During this period when you freelanced, in the early sixties, were there writers that you were particularly drawn to or that had an influence on you? Were there journalists that you would regularly read because you liked how they wrote or to whom you turned for information?

06-00:11:14
Bagdikian: You mean other Washington writers?

06-00:11:16
Rubens: Yes. Or national correspondents.

06-00:11:19
Bagdikian: Well, I read so much. I'm trying to think of things that stand out. A lot of the books were gossipy books or they learned one thing and built a book around it.

06-00:11:44
Rubens: I was asking specifically about journalists. If there were journalists you saw as your polestar, as people whom you emulated. You might have been so busy writing that you—

06-00:12:00
Bagdikian: Well, two of the people I admired very much were George Seldes, who had been a correspondent during World War I in Italy for *The Chicago Tribune* and later did a news pamphlet that came out monthly, and Izzy [I. F.] Stone. I read Stone weekly and I knew him quite closely, he and his sister. His sister was a movie reviewer. I read most of Seldes' books and I read most of the histories of journalism. When I had the Guggenheim, I read dozens and dozens of books. It was wonderful. I had a desk in the Library of Congress. If you had a Guggenheim, at that time you could get a desk at the Library of Congress and you would have stack privileges. You'd go and you'd start reading and you'd say, "Oh, I think I better look at this book," and you'd make a list. Someone comes along, picks up the list at the end of the day, and the next morning books are on your desk. That was wonderful.

06-00:13:50
Rubens: Yes. You were notified that you were a recipient of a Guggenheim in 1962.

06-00:13:57
Bagdikian: Yes. And I must say that I didn't appreciate what that really was. I knew what it was but I didn't appreciate how lucky I was to get one.

06-00:14:17
Rubens: Now, is that the genesis of—

06-00:14:19
Bagdikian: What surprises me now is how much money they get. I got a moderate amount of money, but not much, but it was a great honor. I was glad to have it.

06-00:14:31
Rubens: But you kept writing. All during that period you were writing for *The Saturday Evening Post* and for the *Columbia Journalism Review.*. So is the Guggenheim what affords you the time to start working on *In the Midst of Plenty*? How does that come about?

06-00:14:55
Bagdikian: *In the Midst of Plenty*, let's see—that was published by Beacon Press.

06-00:15:04
Rubens: In 1964.

06-00:15:06
Bagdikian: Yes. Beacon Press used to be an adjunct of the Unitarian Church and I used to be on their board of advisors for their denominational magazine, *The Unitarian*.

06-00:15:30
Rubens: When did you become a Unitarian? Before moving to Washington?

06-00:15:37
Bagdikian: Oh, yes. It was when I was living in Providence, Rhode Island, which is one of the most Catholic states in the union. The Catholic diocese got the Rhode Island State Assembly to pass a law saying that one hour per week, as part of the school hours, the last hour would release children to go to their place of worship. Well, if you didn't have a denomination, didn't want to go to a place of worship or your parents said no, you just sat in an empty classroom doing nothing. And I didn't want my kids doing that. So I looked around and said, "Oh, the Unitarian Church is just for me. That's the one I want." And I took my kids there to the Sunday school—they had a terrific curriculum and still does. And while I was waiting for them, I thought I might as well listen to the pastor. The pastor turned out to be a pacifist socialist whom I happened to like. Mostly it was that period of time, Sundays, when the kids were in the Sunday school and I was sitting in this beautiful pristine colonial church in Providence. It really was a colonial church. It was the peaceful time that I think was significant in ways that are very hard to describe. It wasn't that you had great thoughts necessarily but it was a time of peace and consideration of the subjects the pastor was preaching on. I liked the music. That was when I really got involved in Unitarianism. I became a member of the board of the Unitarian magazine. From that time on I was very active in Unitarian affairs.

When I moved to Washington, I attended the big church in Washington, but it was too big for me and I stopped going to the church. But I would go periodically back to Boston. A friend of mine was a Unitarian preacher and he was very adventurous. We went to the Middle East together. He was very knowledgeable. Jack Mendelsohn. He described how when he became the president of the Unitarian association nationally, part of the inauguration of the president of the Unitarian Church is to deliver the sermon at the Unitarian Church in Boston near the Boston Common. He delivered his inaugural sermon. There was a very lively elderly woman who waited from the door. Of course, the pastor always comes out and is at the door as people leave. He thought, "Okay, I know what she's going to ask. She's going to ask whether Mendelsohn was a Jewish name." But he was very surprised when she said, "I have a question for you. Why do you call yourself Jack instead of John?" He and I became very good friends. But I did get very much involved in Unitarianism. Of all the denominations, that's my favorite, even though my father was a Congregationalist minister.

06-00:20:50
Rubens: What did your father think of your joining the Unitarians?

06-00:20:57
Bagdikian: Well, he wasn't terribly happy but he didn't say anything. He left it to me. My stepmother, however, was horrified. First of all, before the kids went to church, she would come. When they would visit me in Providence, she'd say, "Are the children churched yet?" I'd say, "No." She'd say, "Oh, they must be." She was a very sanctimonious woman. Every time they'd come, "Are the children churched yet?" I'd say, "No." "You must do that. You must do that. God will not forgive you. You must do that." I said I did bring them to church. She said, "Oh, thank god. Thank god. Finally they will be saved. Where do they go?" I said, "The Unitarian church." She gasped and said, "Oh, that's worse than Catholic." So much for—

06-00:22:13
Rubens: Right, pleasing her. So we took this turn to discuss your Unitarianism because you said *In the Midst of Plenty* came out of your association with the Unitarian Church or with Beacon Press?

06-00:22:30
Bagdikian: I think I say in the book that it came from John Kennedy's speech about how sinful it was that people starved in a country that has plenty.

06-00:22:51
Rubens: There was another book that you read also that had influenced you. Wilbur Cohen from Michigan had written a book on poverty in America.

06-00:23:06
Bagdikian: Yes, yes. But, the thing that got me going on poverty was Michael Harrington. Michael Harrington was a very popular speaker and writer and he wrote from an almost theocratic standpoint about the sinfulness of the United States being so rich but having poor people. So when I decided to look into that, among the people I read was Wilbur Cohen, the scholar, who did a lot of scholarly work. But I read other scholarly books about social stratification and where it came from and various economic and social layers of the population.

And that was my mode of operating during all of my career. I would read what's been done. I'd read the authorities and then I would make sure to either talk to, at great length and in many places, the people who were affected by the people at the top or I would live with them for a week or a month.

06-00:24:40
Rubens: Which is what you did with this book, *In the Midst of Plenty*. You lived with people when you were doing the research for this book.

06-00:24:51
Bagdikian: Yes. For example, I lived with a West Virginia family that lived on a food allotment once a month from the United Mineworkers Relief Fund. They were wretchedly poor even with that, although they had the bare essentials for themselves and their kids. But in the last two days while I was there, we ran out of food. The only thing we had was a little flour. So we went up into the

hills and picked berries, mixed it with the flour and made a kind of mash and that's what we ate for two days. At the end of that time, naturally, before I left town I went to the nearest store and got bundles of food and brought it to them. Not having any illusion that this really solves their problem, but I had imposed on them, and they were very happy to have the food.

06-00:26:12
Rubens: So did you have an advance from Beacon Press? Did you contract with them to do this? I'm trying to get at what's driving you to do this study.

06-00:26:25
Bagdikian: Well, I never did any book because of the money. I've forgotten whether I got an advance. I think I had a contract and it may have had a small advance but Beacon Press didn't pay much. Later on, when I was doing stuff for Harper & Row, I got much larger advances. But as a freelance writer, I usually needed an advance because you have expenses to do your research. And I've forgotten whether I had an advance for that. I may have.

06-00:27:22
Rubens: I'm trying to get at what's driving you to do more on this topic. Michael Harrington's written on it and the Wilbur book and you feel there's more to be said.

06-00:27:33
Bagdikian: Well, because I guess it was the war. The Nazis. The Holocaust. Mussolini. The world had a lot of trouble in it. My father was a very special kind of man. He always was very moral and self-sacrificing. I had an uncle who was a very warm man in my life. But I read a lot and maybe because there were a lot of theological books around. I don't know. They weren't very scintillating. They were books by people like Emmanuel Kant, and lots of reviews for places such as *Homiletic Review*, publications for Protestant clergymen.

06-00:28:55
Rubens: Well, as you said when we talked last week, you also spent quite a bit of time in the South and saw firsthand the poverty that existed.

06-00:29:04
Bagdikian: Oh, there's no question—I was concerned with civil rights and the poverty. They went together.

06-00:29:13
Rubens: Were you pleased with the book's reception?

06-00:30:48
Bagdikian: It was very well received. It was reviewed, I think because reviewers of books in newspapers were usually very well read and tended to be socially conscious. I remember one was the book editor of *The* Chicago *Sun-Times*. I think he was deaf. And we would converse because he had somebody transcribing for him. So we'd have conversations and I would do things for

him. I was surprised how widely my books would get reviewed. Not the early ones, but the later ones.

06-00:32:11
Rubens: I want to ask you about an observation that runs through many of your books including your autobiography, about newspapers starting to make money in the 1960s.

06-00:32:35
Bagdikian: What really happened was, whether or not they made money, the families had to think of their inheritance. The best papers were family-owned. The Pulitzers, the *Courier-Journal*, *The New York Times*, the Baltimore *Sun* and so forth. They were very good because the owners at the time were good. And if they wanted to maintain family control they had to find a way of doing it without having to transfer ownership in a conventional way because that's very expensive and uncertain.

They could, under the tax laws, form a trust. The trust was not going to make money. It would be in control of the company. And so what they would do—for example, the Sulzbergers wanted to keep it within the Sulzberger family. As the chief owner approached a certain age, sixty, sixty-five, the company lawyer would say, "It's about time you began thinking about what happens in the next generation in ownership." And so what they could do is leave it in trust, which meant that it couldn't be interfered with, to the youngest healthy member of the family who was old enough to have shown a sense of responsibility. So they would leave it from an elderly member of the family to a very young member of the family, and they would inherit the leadership of the trust. That would last fifty or sixty years. And then, in turn, those people would leave it to one of their children, or to a member of the family who was very young. That's how they maintained control. Whether or not they made money was a question. It depended on the paper. I think Denver made money. *The Courier Journal* made money. I was very close to being hired by the *Courier Journal*. He wanted me to become his editor. He said, "I make more money on my radio station than I do on my newspaper but I use my radio station, which I really don't care about, to make sure my papers remain solvent." That was true of most of the good papers. They found a way, by leaving a family trust, to keep it within the family.

Because what was happening was there was a beginning of the change of Gannett and those people who were buying up things, like Newhouse—they would go to minority owners of a paper that was making money, whether it was in Minneapolis or wherever, and they would approach second- and third-generation children who didn't care much about the paper one way or the other. All they knew was that every year they'd get a hundred thousand dollar check in dividends from the paper and the radio station. And Sam Newhouse would say, "You're only getting a hundred thousand a year. I'll give you $500,000 for your stock." Gannett did the same thing. He'd pay them

multiples of what they were getting in an annual dividend. Usually the dividends were not very high. And so they'd buy up enough of the minority stock that they could then have an influence on the board. When you get fifteen percent interest you can vote at stockholders meetings and then you have an influence, and worm your way into control. But the good papers used trusts not to make money—they used them as a way to protect the ownership.

06-00:37:37
Rubens: Later you will write about the movement toward monopoly, and we'll discuss that. So I think we've done what we need to do today. I think the next story is you going to RAND.

We didn't discuss all the journals for which you wrote. We didn't look at articles that you wrote for *The Bulletin* or *The American Society of Newspaper Editors*. I guess your writings will speak for themselves. But let me close by asking you: Of the magazines you wrote for, did you have a favorite magazine besides *The Saturday Evening Post* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*? There was *Harper's, The Nation, The New Republic*? Was there one that you liked?

06-00:38:49
Bagdikian: Well, I subscribed to exactly those magazines. *The New Republic, The Progressive*. When *The Saturday Evening Post* was in its good days, I got it anyway as a member of the staff. I read those and I read some of the magazines that I didn't like particularly. But mostly it was books that I'd read.

06-00:39:29
Rubens: And in terms of contributing to journals, what was the difference to you between *The New Republic* and *The Nation*? Did you like writing for one better than the other?

06-00:39:40
Bagdikian: That depended who was the publisher. *The New Republic* used to be run by Gilbert Harrison. He was a wealthy man who was a progressive and he and I worked together very closely. And as a matter of fact, for a while we lived near each other in Washington. They were building the National Cathedral then. And Gil had a house, an English Tudor house right across the street from the National Cathedral. When they finally got to the steeple, they put in a carillon; he despised carillons, so he moved to New York, and then I didn't see him so often. But I worked with him a lot and he asked me to write stories.

06-00:40:43
Rubens: But you enjoyed him and that was an easy magazine to write for?

06-00:40:50
Bagdikian: Yes. And I would see him and we talked quite a bit.

06-00:40:57
Rubens: Okay. So next week we'll talk about getting to the RAND Corporation.

06-00:41:02
Bagdikian: Okay.

[End of Audio File 6]

Interview #4: June 15, 2010
[Begin Audio File 7]

07-00:00:02
Rubens: This is interview number four. It's the 15th of June and we're with Ben Bagdikian in his home. And I want to talk to you today about going to RAND and preparing your book *Information Machines*. But just prior to that, I want to reflect on the work that you were doing for the *Columbia Journalism Review*. It seemed to me that in the year '65, '66 and '67, your columns had a lot to do with critiquing newspapers and journalism throughout the country. And I'm wondering if that is the period when you can start saying that you became a media critic. That this is a positive identity.

07-00:01:01
Bagdikian: I'd been accused of being a media critic earlier. Very early, when I began writing critical articles about some of the worst practices in journalism. The trade journals either would not say anything about things that other publications mentioned or else they would refer to a "so-called media critic", as though it were not really an activity but a kind of personal idiosyncrasy. Well, as a matter of fact, in terms of the percentage of people who were doing media criticism, it was idiosyncratic.

07-00:02:05
Rubens: Meaning there were not many people doing media critiques?

07-00:02:07
Bagdikian: Not a whole lot. And the ones that existed either were doing a good job in their own locality, but they'd never got beyond that, or else they were people who are mostly defending the establishment journalism. And there were a number of those. They'd mostly do that in a matter of defense or they were good useful histories of journalism. And they'd bring it up to date but they would steer clear of being critical of some of the large influential publications. Those were taken, at that time, as a kind of legitimate activity, to be conservative, to have a kind of permanent set of heroes and villains. Franklin Roosevelt was a villain but Father Coughlin and some of the very conservative broadcasters were considered worth spending some time on. But on the whole, media criticism had not begun to be something accepted as a useful or at least legitimate part of the whole profession.

Almost every other profession has criticism or they had perpetual analysis of what's going on, whether it's health or international relations. There were large established journals that were influential. Other than the *Columbia Journalism Review*, there wasn't any other journal that was genuinely critical in a professional manner. So that for a while it was a rather lonely activity but I wasn't bothered by that, because I enjoyed it and I knew what good journalism was, because I had been permitted, in the paper I worked on, to do what was considered worthwhile. And in time those articles, those series, won prizes. And papers liked prizes. They loved them.

07-00:05:28
Rubens: In an article for the *Columbia Journalism Review* in the winter of 1966, it's called "A Golden Age of Oracles", you said that your paper, the *Providence Journal and Bulletin*, didn't have columnists in it until the publisher died.

07-00:05:55
Bagdikian: Yes. The original publisher died and a young man married into the owning family and he had very definite conservative interests of his own.

07-00:06:30
Rubens: And in an earlier article, in '64, you wrote about how newspapers used columnists. You were doing a study of about whether syndicated columnists counterbalance or support the politics of the newspaper. And it seemed to me that you're using information, polling data on 700 different newspapers, to come up with the conclusion that most of the opinion columnists are conservative.

07-00:07:14
Bagdikian: Yes. I've forgotten who the benefactor was, but he gave the *Columbia Journalism Review* a fairly large grant, which they administered, and gave me not all of it, but enough of it to look into the accuracy of those columnists.

07-00:07:41
Rubens: And what their politics were.

07-00:07:42
Bagdikian: And their politics. And part of their politics included a kind of obsession with things that they could criticize over and over and over again—liberal politicians.

07-00:09:10
Rubens: So it seems to me that in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the kinds of articles you're writing are about the politics of the administration, the change from Kennedy to Johnson and what's going on in Johnson's administration, and then a lot that is media—that is journalism criticism, that is taking a look at the role of the columnist. There's a wonderful piece that you do on questioning whether there is a suppression within the newspapers on the activities of Nazis, and you're questioning the politics of that. And so here you're trying to take a balanced point of view; you're known as a liberal, I think, by then.

07-00:09:48
Bagdikian: Yes. And the benefactor who subsidized my study for the *Columbia Journalism Review* was rather unhappy with how Columbia University dealt with that.

07-00:10:01
Rubens: Is that right?

07-00:10:02
Bagdikian: Yes. At the time, and for a long period, Columbia University Trustees weren't happy having a journalism school because they considered it a kind of trade school, and what they wanted to do was make it part of the sort of fine arts department, in which they would maybe have a couple of faculty members who would specialize in journalism. But they had been left a very large amount of money by the original Pulitzer, and even at the time—Nicholas Murray Butler was the president of Columbia, if my memory is correct, and he resisted the gift to the journalism program and the journalism review. He had to be persuaded to accept the money.

The first person who administered it was an advertising person, someone who spent his whole career in advertising. Well, it was a very odd appointment. He was a very nice fellow and he gave me very little trouble. But he was not as familiar with the media as you would expect the dean of a very large institution of journalism to be. A lot of journalists were disappointed with that kind of resistance and emphasis on not offending advertisers. I didn't have a personal problem but some people did.

There was a slow change. He was replaced by somebody else who did have some experience, not in advertising but in journalism. He was willing to resist the desire of the trustees to either downgrade or get rid of our journalism school.

And then some other journalism reviews sprang up, including some that were were ephemeral. They would be put out by some individuals or some other small institution in a part of the country, in which in their own bailiwick they did good work. Or they would be started by journalists funded by the big newspaper companies to defend the status quo. But, as I mentioned, the audience for journalism was changing. It was not so easy for a few newspaper owners or reactionary individuals to influence the whole profession.

Now, a few individuals continued to have a discernable impact. Sam Newhouse, for example, who was really not much interested at that time. The elder Newhouse. He was not interested in the content. He just wanted [papers] to be efficient organizations. When he would visit a paper, he had a rule. "Nobody sits down."

"I'll walk through," and he would walk through the press room, maybe the newsroom.

07-00:15:44
Rubens: How did you learn something like that? Did other people tell you this or had you observed him?

07-00:15:50
Bagdikian: Well, it was not much noticed.

07-00:15:55
Rubens: It was just *known*.

07-00:15:56
Bagdikian: Those who paid attention were amused by that.

But the Gannett organization did have a big impact. There was a very deliberate desire to build an organization that would attract attention, make money, and in fact, while it was negative about critics and about me in particular, it did begin to have a positive impact, because some papers got money from that organization and they would leave them alone. They would let them have their little critical activities in their staff. And in the seventies a foundation supported a national council that would receive complaints from the public about serious errors, or what were believed by the people to be errors, and they could send that to the council and if it was a serious complaint they would have someone do research and they would issue a report. It was an attempt at professional accountability. And after ten years, they asked the industry to continue it, but they all, including *The New York Times*, rejected the idea. They said no one had to tell them what was newsworthy.

07-00:18:11
Rubens: This was in the seventies, though?

07-00:18:12
Bagdikian: Yes.

07-00:18:13
Rubens: Yes, later. Yes. Well, just staying in the late sixties and regarding your work for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, are you choosing what you write about or are you given assignments?

07-00:18:28
Bagdikian: No. It fell into a pattern. I did a letter from Washington after I moved to Washington.

07-00:18:36
Rubens: There were six issues a year; it came out very two months?

07-00:18:38
Bagdikian: I had a piece in it from the time it was established, in ’61, until the time I left Washington when I went to RAND.

07-00:18:52
Rubens: And, in fact, you continued to write for it afterward, but I guess not the regular column.

07-00:18:55
Bagdikian: Occasionally, but not on a regular basis.

07-00:18:57
Rubens: But did you pretty much choose what you wanted to write or were you sometimes given assignments?

07-00:19:06
Bagdikian: Oh. It was so informal. There'd be visits to New York and you're talking things over and coming out with an idea. But mostly I could do what I wanted.

07-00:19:21
Rubens: How often would you go to New York? Would you have one editor that you met with?

07-00:19:26
Bagdikian: Yes. Jim Boylan was the first editor and he remained the editor through what I think were the really establishment years and he was there when I left and he was a very good editor.

07-00:19:46
Rubens: Okay. So I didn't want to give short shrift to your freelance writing between '64 to '67 or so, when you really are hammering out a lot of work. I know you had an agent. You have just a range of publications that you're publishing in. I meant to ask you about this piece for *Good Housekeeping*. It was on the use of drugs.

07-00:20:21
Bagdikian: Well, occasionally I would be asked by a national publication to write something. Sometimes it was *Harper's*, sometimes *The Atlantic*, but mostly it would be publications that had some relation to journalism.

07-00:20:51
Rubens: Or for the most part you wrote for more serious, almost intellectually oriented kind of works. You published, though, in *Esquire*. Of course, you continued to publish in *Saturday Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic.*

07-00:21:07
Bagdikian: And things would be picked up elsewhere, which began to impress editors in this country. I would receive telephone calls from foreign journalists who wanted to ask about certain practices as they applied to their country or had questions about what was happening in this country. And I seemed to get much more personal feedback from Italy, from Germany, from France, from London, than I did from major organizations in this country.

07-00:21:57
Rubens: So how does it come about that you're invited to go to the RAND Corporation to study?

07-00:22:15
Bagdikian: I was living in Washington and a neighbor of mine was Harry Rowan who became the director of Rand. Now, RAND had been established by the Air Force to do systems analysis of how they should plan for where they would

have their air bases around the world, during the Cold War—how would they manage their supply lines. And RAND had a very large body of quite highly skilled and some distinguished people. There were a couple of Nobel Prizewinners at RAND. And Harry had just been made new head of RAND. And the RAND Board had decided that they would broaden beyond just doing systems analysis for the Air Force, and they themselves were interested in doing things for large municipalities. For example, they had a contract from New York City. How do we reorganize our police department? How do we organize our fire department so that it's more effective and less waste in time and money? I think John Lindsay was the mayor. And they had a good relationship.

So when there was going to be civilian work, when Harry came to me, I said to Harry, "Harry, I have always turned aside taking any federal money for anything while I've been a reporter because I want to be free to report on government and politics without having any conflicts of interest. And I don't want to do any classified work." I'd done criticism of the classification system, which was very sloppy and broad and frequently kind of crazy in the way it operated. And he said, "No. This will not involve any defense work. But we'd like you just to sit in on some meetings about unclassified information, because we have a lot of highly reputed technical people but we don't have people who are generalists."

07-00:25:42
Rubens: So he's initiating this? He's coming to you.

07-00:25:51
Bagdikian: Yes. I would get a very good salary at RAND. Got paid more than I did certainly at the paper where I'd been. That paper never paid much. They happened to be very good but they didn't pay much. But RAND paid. But that's not why I went there, of course. I went there because I could do a book on the future of communications. I would have a secretary. I wouldn't have to do all the running around. I could have access to any books and publications that I wanted and they were ideal working conditions. I was in the social science department.

07-00:26:46
Rubens: So you had a book idea in mind. You had been nurturing this idea.

07-00:26:53
Bagdikian: Yes. It was going to be about what was going to happen to communications, public communications. And so that was the goal from the beginning. How are people going to get their news? How are they going to communicate with each other? What's going to happen to radio, and this new medium, television? At RAND, I would simply hand a list to my secretary and a day or two, there would be the books, there would be the publications. And it was ideal in that way.

07-00:28:01
Rubens: Did you move your family out to Los Angeles?

07-00:28:04
Bagdikian: Yes. We moved to a very pleasant place in Pacific Palisades near the Getty estate. Getty had a strange kind of zoo in the canyon right next to the hillside cottage where I lived and we could hear the buffalo. He also had a group of man-eating dogs, which he kept in the house all day, and then at night he'd let them out. So if anybody tried to get in, these dogs would really tear them apart. I think he was kind of paranoid. One of the gates to the opening in his compound, his canyon, was in our backyard in Pacific Palisades. And we got to know the watchman because he'd come up and he'd have to open the gate very slightly to let his son go to Cub Scout meetings. And when the boy came back from his Cub Scout meeting, he came to our house. We had the telephone number of his father. The father would drive to the gate. The boy would quickly get in his father's car and they'd quickly shut the door of the car because there are all these dogs in there, and they'd drive to their home.

07-00:29:44
Rubens: How old were your children by then? You had two boys?

07-00:29:47
Bagdikian: Yes. My older son by that time was working in Washington. I leased my house in Washington when I went to Santa Monica and my youngest son came with me.

07-00:30:15
Rubens: How old was he at that time?

07-00:30:18
Bagdikian: Eric was about fifteen or sixteen. He went to Palisades High. And my older son worked in Senator [Claiborne] Pell's office and he got increasingly responsible jobs. He is a very bright guy. Did more than just drive Senator Pell. And I knew Senator Pell. I used to go to his house when I lived in Washington and I remembered his house because he had a genuine Leonardo da Vinci drawing in his restroom. That's very high-class. He came from a family that had a lot of background in diplomacy.

07-00:31:33
Rubens: Did you have many politicians that you socialized with in Washington? How is it that you were a guest at Pell's house?

07-00:31:43
Bagdikian: Oh, well, he came from Rhode Island. And I knew the Pells. I knew him when he first got to be a senator and we used to talk a lot, because he was a relative newcomer. Now, his father was a very experienced man. He was in the diplomatic service. But Claiborne, his son, needed briefing in Washington. So we knew each other. That was when I was in Washington. I would be invited to his house.

07-00:32:30
Rubens: All right. So tell me about what it was like to be at the RAND. You have a secretary, you have copying machines, you have—

07-00:32:39
Bagdikian: Yes. Ideal working conditions, and then it turned out that, whether it's true in general, that people who are in very high level technological and theoretical studies are also very serious about food. They would try the best restaurants in the whole area. They would have serious discussions about the merits of various places—would it be Mexican restaurant A or Latin American B? So we'd go to lunch, let them do the deciding, and I learned where all the best restaurants were.

I was a kind of freak [there] in the sense that I didn't do any government work. But I had friends at RAND and I'd go to their parties and dinners sometimes. There were a number of gourmet cooks, and as I say, people get in that kind of activity, I suspect, for some reason. Very careful about getting the best food they can find. So I did know them and that's where I got to know Dan Ellsberg.

07-00:34:42
Rubens: So when did you meet him?

07-00:34:46
Bagdikian: Harry Rowan, when he became head of RAND, realized that the analysis of our involvement in Vietnam had been a tragically mistaken analysis of captured prisoners from the North Vietnamese army. The earlier analysis and said that we were winning the war in Vietnam because these North Vietnamese prisoners would say, "Yes, we're losing and South Vietnam is winning." And then there was a kind of undercurrent of experts who really knew Vietnam. There had been scholars all along who said a lot of this doesn't make any sense. And Harry said we are going to review all the prisoner interviews from the North Vietnamese to see what they really said. And so that's where Dan Ellsberg came in. He was doing a review of those, and they found, of course, that in fact the POWs from North Vietnam were actually saying that, "You can't win because we keep track of every place you go. You use airplanes and large military movements and we use individuals who know their own countryside." So that made a big difference. And Dan was a part of that review, and he realized that we had been listening to the generals in Vietnam who didn't want to be seen as losers and were picking whatever positive things they could to say at the press conferences. And the press conferences turned out to be meaningless. Among correspondents, the daily official news conference in Vietnam was known as "The Five O'clock Follies".

07-00:37:19
Rubens: So you knew what kind of research he was doing when you started?

07-00:37:24
Bagdikian: Yes. I knew what they were doing but I didn't have access to the classified papers and I didn't want them. And I told Harry I don't want to see any classified stuff.

07-00:37:35
Rubens: Tell me about your book.

07-00:37:54
Bagdikian: It was about what would happen with the new communications. There was a fundamental change coming in technology and the place in society of mass communication. So that was what my research was all about—finding out what are the new devices coming in. And I used the Delphi system that had been used in RAND, which is where you send a set of questions on a field of study to the top experts in them, the vice-president of RCA, the head of a department in MIT and all of these experts, and you then get their responses. You put them all together, analyze their differences, and give these collections of responses to the same people: "Now that you have seen what your peers have said, do you want to change how it looks to you?" And I used that system.

07-00:39:11
Rubens: You were generating your own statistical research?

07-00:39:15
Bagdikian: Yes. It was very useful for me. I learned a lot of things from it. I also found that I was much too conservative in seeing the rate of change. There is one device that was asked about. Would there be a time when people could have suitcase-sized equipment that could be taken with them wherever they were and make a report over a regular telephone line from their hotel room? And I sent that around and all the experts said, "Well, we think that in about seventeen years or so that may be possible." But just a short time later, by the time I got to the *Post*, I was ordering one of those devices for my own staff. But most of their predictions were pretty good. That one was obviously much too conservative. I bought these devices for some of my staff. They could go to a mine disaster in Kentucky and they could report right then and there from the nearest hotel room with one of these gadgets.

07-00:41:21
Rubens: Now, part of the study also was on the economics of the American newspaper. It's almost a prelude to your later work on the monopolization and consolidation of the news media. But you talk about the influence of advertising and the beginnings of consolidation.

07-00:41:45
Bagdikian: Yes. Because at that time it became obvious that individual newspapers were having trouble staying alive when they were all on their own. The only difference would be if they had had a founder who made a lot of money and established a very large foundation whose annual interest would support that

paper all by itself. And that was true in places like Louisville and a few other places. But on the whole, an individual paper that did not have that outside income was beginning to lose ads to radio and television. And the number of papers was shrinking. That was this thing I saw happening. And the best papers I worked on were family-owned, where the family had a profound interest in the existence and quality of their paper. *The New York Times* has a trust, as we talked about before.

07-00:45:04
Rubens: At this period when you're out in Los Angeles, are you reading *The Los* Angeles *Times*?

07-00:45:10
Bagdikian: Yes. I became very friendly with Otis Chandler when he was running *The Los Angeles*.

07-00:45:22
Rubens: How did that come about?

07-00:45:23
Bagdikian: Well, when I moved to Santa Monica, I was, of course, going to L.A. quite a bit. And he invited me to his house, and the editor invited me to his house, and I got to know the people at *The Los* Angeles *Times*. And Otis took the family inheritance seriously but he also was really interested in hunting wild animals in Africa. I think he was a good man and he foresaw these problems and said, very frankly, "I don't know how long we can maintain our control." They did not form the usual kind of trust. They picked people who were stockholders but would increase the income they got and the dividends they paid. Again, Otis at that point stepped out, unfortunately, and you got people who began making deals with advertisers and it became a kind of scandal that the advertisers would have a voice in what the Sunday paper front page would look like. And that became one of the big scandals in the newspaper business.

Then the L.A. *Times* began to lose its position. It was famous for running enormously long stories, and a lot of them. They would run stories from China, from the Middle East, from around the world and in the United States that would run to four or five columns. People used to joke about it, that they'd have to finish a story before lunch. But the stockholders decided they ought to be more like a conventional corporation. They hired a man and told him, "It's your job to see that our dividends in this next year are going to be higher." And he made a deal with advertisers to have a voice. There would be two editors. One would be a journalist and the other would be from the advertising department and they would decide what went into the paper.

07-00:48:35
Rubens: When is this happening? Is this during the time that you're out there?

07-00:48:41
Bagdikian: Well, eventually—

07-00:48:45
Rubens: They ended that practice, sure.

07-00:48:47
Bagdikian: Yes. *The Chicago Tribune* bought the L.A. *Times*. And together, they now have run into the same kinds of problems. They can't survive together. And that's another story.

07-00:48:58
Rubens: Hard to believe that the L.A. *Times* would wither away.

07-00:49:43
Rubens: Let's talk just a little bit more about being in Los Angeles. You remained with RAND for two years.

07-00:49:50
Bagdikian: Yes.

07-00:49:51
Rubens: Did you know when you went there that you would be there for a certain amount of time?

07-00:50:00
Bagdikian: Well, it was understood that I'd be there to do this book. And it did get published. It may still be in print, for all I know. [*The Information Machines*]

07-00:50:16
Rubens: The publisher was Harper & Row.

07-00:50:35
Rubens: I'm reading a review by Nicholas Johnson. He was an FCC commissioner and he gives it a brilliant review in *The New York Times*. Were you back in Washington by the time that the book came out?

07-00:51:08
Bagdikian: I think so. And I knew Nick Johnson. I got to know him and we became friends because we both could see that the FCC had to take an action to protect radio and television and other media from losing their access to the air waves as corporations monopolized them. And the danger was you would limit the number of licenses that were available for radio and television stations, and that was the fight, too. And then after the new administration came in, the people on the FCC who wanted to retain the kind of responsibility to the public at large rather than the dividends for the big TV stations and change were a minority. And you had to work with those people in the minority. And so I got to know them pretty well. And they would give speeches around the country and they would ask me to give some talks around the country. And that became the big issue. And eventually the majority began giving licenses for more commercial use than public affairs.

07-00:53:28
Rubens: And Johnson was a dissenter on that?

07-00:53:29
Bagdikian: Yes.

07-00:53:30
Rubens: So he gave the book quite a wonderful review. It was reviewed in a lot of places. I have to say *The Saturday Review* didn't give it the greatest review, although it said it is a valuable guide to the future. And many of the reviewers pointed to the charts in the back, the research data that helped to anticipate the nature of the terrain the new technology would open up.

07-00:54:02
Bagdikian: Well, reviews are written by journalists. The book got good reviews. But I never kept a scrapbook. I regret that, because every now and then I would have liked to see something that I said. When I wrote a sort of memoir, I had to go to libraries to get copies of my own clippings.

07-00:54:37
Rubens: I have a clipping here from John Chancellor. Wasn't he a TV news commentator? He wrote the book review for *Book World* in 1971. He calls it a spacious and encyclopedia survey of the future of the news business.

So let's stop for a minute here.

[tape interruption]

07-00:55:50
Bagdikian: Usually I'd research a book for two, three, sometimes four years. Now, I had a job usually and I couldn't spend twenty-four hours a day. But I don't think I ever put out a book in less than two years of study.

07-00:56:17
Rubens: I think you were at RAND for two years. To do this book, *The Information Machines*, did the writing come easy?

07-00:56:29
Bagdikian: Well, it was a wonderful time when I didn't have any other responsibilities.

07-00:56:34
Rubens: Although I think you still wrote a couple of columns for the *Columbia Journalism Review*. You also wrote the introduction to a book on the history of journalism, as well.

07-00:56:48
Bagdikian: Well, I did more introductions. I have a shelf full of books that I did introductions to.

07-00:57:01
Rubens: Did your agent get those opportunities for you, or did scholars and authors solicit you?

07-00:57:07
Bagdikian: Yes. Yes, right. And they would see me as a sympathetic character or someone who could say something about the subject of the book. So yes, there are quite a few.

And I had a relationship with *The Nation*, with [Victor] Navasky, and I did a lot of things for him and his magazine. And after I got to California and was made dean of the school of journalism, I read that he had become a publisher after being an editor. And I wrote Navasky and said, "Both of us have spent our lives beating up on publishers. Now you're a publisher. Do I have to beat up on you?" And he wrote back and said, "If you can be a dean, I can be a publisher."

07-00:58:18
Rubens: He was referring to your position as Dean of UC Berkeley's School of Journalism. We'll get to that.

Let me change the tape.

[End Audio File 7]

[Begin Audio File 8]

08-00:00:00
Rubens: Ben, under what conditions did you move back to Washington? Did you have the job with the *Post* lined up when you go back there?

08-00:00:12
Bagdikian: When I was still at RAND, toward the end of the time there, I got a call from the Beverly Hilton where Katharine Graham and the publisher of the paper, Paul Ignatius, was staying. And Katharine asked me if I would come and become assistant managing head of the national news, because they were having a kind of merry-go-round of editors who came and went; they were having trouble with one editor and they needed an editor that would give it some quality. Ben Bradlee was very ambitious. He wanted first of all to make sure that the *Post* beat all its competitors. The afternoon paper in Washington was still being published and he'd liked to have bureaus all around the world. He was very ambitious to do this and Katharine Graham also was. And so I got this call and she asked would I take that. I said, "I really love being a reporter, but let me think about it."

08-00:01:48
Rubens: What had called their attention to you? What was it that made them interested in you? Did you understand?

08-00:01:55
Bagdikian: I'm not sure. I had met Katharine Graham in another connection and possibly Ignatius.

08-00:02:19
Rubens: I think you had also written about *The Washington Post* in a review article of newspapers you had done for *Columbia Journalism Review*. And you had said *The Washington Post* could be a better newspaper than it was.

08-00:02:34
Bagdikian: That's right. That's what drew them to me. She said, "I want you to do that."

08-00:02:40
Rubens: Do you remember what you meant by that? What you understood kept the *Post* from being a better newspaper?

08-00:02:47
Bagdikian: Yes. The idea was to get it to be kind of *The New York Times* of Washington. And so I did agree. What I remember was that I was going to begin on a certain day at the *Post* and it was going to be the day after I left RAND. And I remember very late at night at RAND dictating a last reference note for the book I did at RAND, and then the next morning taking the plane to Washington. I landed in Washington to take over this job. And American Airlines had lost my bag with all my clothes in it. And I called American Airlines and said, "Listen, I need that. I'm just coming in to get a job to be one of the executive editors of *The Washington Post*." Well, airlines, of course, give the media a lot of attention and American Airlines said, "You go out and buy a full set of clothes, anyplace you want, and send us the bill." So I went to Brooks Brothers, I went to the best store. I got a whole set of clothes, some of which I still have. So then I went to the *Post* and began.

08-00:04:50
Rubens: Had you met Bradlee before you went back to Washington?

08-00:04:58
Bagdikian: Yes. Because when I was doing research on a book I went to see him about something. I've forgotten what it was. He wasn't terribly interested. It wasn't in his field of interest, although he could turn his attention to a number of things. He was a very quick-witted and very bright man and very funny man.

08-00:05:37
Rubens: So how did you understand your job? What was spelled out to you about what you were supposed to do?

08-00:05:44
Bagdikian: The hierarchy of *The Washington Post*, certainly then, was the owner/publisher Katharine Graham. The executive editor was Ben Bradlee. The most important editor under Bradlee was the national staff. They had a specialized staff for religion and science. They had a city staff to cover their municipality. They had a sports staff. But the staff that really counted, the one everybody wanted to get on, including Carl Bernstein, was the national staff. Bernstein used to nag me all the time—he was on the metropolitan staff—and he was saying, "Give me a story to do. Give me a story to do." He was kind of a pest who turned out to be a very high-class pest. So my job was to take over

this staff, which had become demoralized, apparently, by a previous editor. So I came in and I said, "I'll do it if I can choose my own deputy." And I said, "But I'll have to know the staff for a while before I can do it." After a week or so I knew whom I wanted. He was a very serious, steady man who read all the memos, read all the key material, always could tell me the things that I didn't have time to do myself.

08-00:07:42
Rubens: What was his name?

08-00:07:53
Bagdikian: Peter Silverman. He later took my job. And I remember we used to have a morning meeting to roughly see what do we got coming up. Then we have the big news meeting in the afternoon. In the morning paper, that's where they decide what'll be on the paper the next day. And everybody fought for front-page staff. And the national staff always got the biggest bunch of front page space. The editor of the city staff used to say, "Listen, why does national staff always get most of the space and we don't get it?" And I can remember that we'd go out someplace where we could have a retreat and talk over in an informal way sort of what needed to be done on the paper.

08-00:09:24
Rubens: Well, who was 'we'? The managing staff? The executive staff?

08-00:09:27
Bagdikian: Yes. The managing staff. And all the top editors would go to it. And I think it was Harry Goldstein. We were at some very fancy resort and he climbed up the top diving board and everybody's yelling, "Jump, Harry, jump." Well, he was a rather large man and he said, "Ben, if I jump will you give me a bureau in someplace or other in the United States?" And Bradlee said, "Yes, jump." And he jumped but he didn't get his bureau and that told me something about Bradlee—that what's promised does not always come true. But the city staff editor would always dramatize at the news conference what he had. He was very dramatic. He had a sense of humor but he wanted to get the attention. He could make Bradlee laugh. And Bradlee would laugh. He loved to have him because he put on this big show at the news conference. Such a big show. And he would dramatize. He says, "I got this story that's about a guy. He's walking down toward Dupont Circle and he meets this person." Then he creates really a kind of magazine drama.

I used to eat in a Hungarian restaurant in Washington and they had a violinist who played this schmaltzy Hungarian music. So I hired him to stand outside the door of the news conference, and when Harry was making his pitch in a very dramatic way, this guy started playing this schmaltzy Hungarian music and everybody had a good laugh. That was a very uplifting time for me.

08-00:12:06
Rubens: What other kinds of things were you doing? What did the job require of you? You sat in on the meetings?

08-00:12:14
Bagdikian: I would have to decide what we were going to put on page one. And manage the staff. I had four or five assistant staff who would take the stories from the main staff, national staff, and they would edit them and go over them and then show me things they thought I ought to see. I think they were about forty, something like that. Forty, forty-five. I'd come in at about 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning and leave at about 10:00 at night, 9:00 or 10:00. At 11:00 every night I'd call my desk and I'd talk to the night editor, say, "Anything happening," and "What's in the *Times*?" We had a person in New York who took the first page of *The New York Times* as it came off the presses and sent it by wire service into our shop and they had someone at our presses doing the same thing for *The New York Times.* And at eleven o'clock every night, no matter where I was, I'd call up my desk and say to the night editor, "What's the *Times* got?" We were watching each other very carefully.

08-00:14:45
Rubens: So that would give you some time to change what the content would be?

08-00:14:47
Bagdikian: Yes. If it was really, really huge news. And then I had an argument with Bradlee. I would say, "We have to say in tomorrow's paper, *The New York Times* said today,' because it's too important a story." He hated to hear the words, "*The New York Times* said today." But I'd say, "We got to have that story."

08-00:15:15
Rubens: He just didn't want to give any reference to *The New York Times*, as if it were some kind of bellwether.

08-00:15:20
Bagdikian: Well, there are three papers that every politician in Washington read. They read *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal.* These were important papers and what we published would make a difference. Bradlee hated to be beaten. So when my deputy said, "They're running these stories about the Pentagon Papers," I called Bradlee right away and said, "Ben, we have to run that." And he said, "Yes, we got to run it." We knew something was up. We knew it was a big story somewhere. And Bradlee was itchy. He's saying, "Call everybody you know. It apparently has something to do with RAND." That's as much as we knew. It had something to do with RAND. Bradlee thought it was probably an attack on Cuba. "Find out. Find out." So I called Harry Rowan. I said, "Harry, apparently there's a big story that's going to run in the *Times* tomorrow, something about Cuba. Has the RAND published anything that would be a big story?" He said, "Nothing I know of." I called other people I knew. They had no idea what it was going to be. That night I was invited for dinner at the Watergate apartment of the man

who had been the sub commander of the Nautilus, the first submarine that went under the ice in the North Pole. He was a very nice guy whom I'd got to know. I've forgotten how. And I was having dinner at his home and I excused myself, as I did every night at eleven o'clock, and I called the desk and said, "What do we have?" He said, "The *Times* is publishing secret papers on the history of the war in Vietnam." So that was the beginning of that.

08-00:18:10
Rubens: Should we wait until next week and then tell the story of the Pentagon Papers?

08-00:18:15
Bagdikian: Okay.

08-00:18:18
Rubens: Anything else just prior to that which you'd like to talk about? How about the working conditions and work culture at the *Post.*

[tape interruption]

08-00:19:29
Bagdikian: Well, it was a place filled with ambitious people. Some people called it the Snake Pit, because everyone was trying to make it, and people in city staff were trying to get on the national staff, and the people who were assistants in the national staff wanted to become the top editor of the national staff. It was a very ambitious bunch of people, all of whom want to go to the top. There were a lot of cross-currents that were not so pleasant. There were people who didn't like each other. Bradlee, when he was in a good humor, could defuse that sort of tension. But toward the end it was a very difficult time.

08-00:20:46
Rubens: Let me ask you one more question. Who were some of your best writers on the national desk?

[tape interruption]

08-00:21:26
Bagdikian: The best reporter and writer on the national staff was William Greider. G-R-E-I-D-E-R. And he succeeded me as national editor. Also, a man named [Richard] Harwood was a very good writer. We didn't get along very well because I was the man who replaced him as head of the national staff but he was a very good writer. For example, when there was some big national uproar and we were getting calls from our stringers and bureaus around the country, I would have Harwood take those. He was very good at consolidating all of these incoming reports into a coherent solid story. So I had respect for him, for his skill, but we weren't very good friends.

08-00:22:35
Rubens: Did you actually do any writing yourself?

08-00:22:40
Bagdikian: Not while I was editing. After I left the national staff, while I was the ombudsman, there was a problem there when I wrote one piece that made Katharine very unhappy, but which I think was the correct piece to write.

08-00:23:03
Rubens: All right. Shall we end for today?

08-00:23:05
Bagdikian: Yes, okay.

08-00:23:06
Rubens: All right, good. Good. Thank you so much.

[End of Audio File 8]

Interview #5: June 22, 2010
[Begin Audio File 9]

09-00:00:00
Rubens: This is interview number five and it's the 22nd of June and we're here with Ben Bagdikian to talk about his role in publishing the Pentagon Papers at *The Washington Post*. We're talking about June of 1971. And you said something to me off camera about that time in your life.

09-00:00:27
Bagdikian: The day that I got the Pentagon Papers was the start of probably the most intense and continuous sequence of events that I've ever experienced. I think I went two or three days without sleep, and things were happening all the time. Things changed radically almost hour by hour but came out finally the way I think it should have come out.

09-00:01:15
Rubens: Just before we start talking about the details of how you received the papers and what your battle plan was, I think it might be valuable to establish the political climate in Washington and at the *Post*, because the stature of the *Post* is going to change dramatically. Soon the Watergate story is going to break. I think people [reviewing this oral history] may not realize that it was kind of a difficult time for the press in relation to the Nixon Administration.

09-00:01:58
Bagdikian: Well, it was certainly a hostile time dealing with the Nixon Administration. But also, we were dealing with what had been classified as very secret material, which *The New York Times*, which we regarded as our competitor, had already received. We knew they had something. We didn't know what it was they had, and neither did most of *The New York Times* staff. The *Times* had established, away from the newsroom, a special kind of secret self-contained group to deal with something. The *Times* people, the regular staff, didn't know what it was. We knew, because we knew so many people at the *Times,* that something very hot and secret was involved.

09-00:03:13
Rubens: The rumors had been circulating for months, isn't that right?

09-00:03:18
Bagdikian: Yes, for about four months. And the source for them began to think that they were never going to print them, which is why the source of them, who was, as we all know now was Dan Ellsberg, decided that they weren't going to get printed by the *Times.* So the next important paper was the Washington *Post*. It came not directly as a first signal from him. I had attended the regular afternoon conference at *The Washington Post*, which was when the editors of each of the staffs put in a schedule of their important stories. And Ben Bradlee would listen to them and allocate the amount of space each would get. And the national staff, I was assistant managing editor of national news, my staff always got the largest number of pages and that was always a matter of

contention with the metropolitan staff and others trying to get more. But, in fact, we always had the most space.

There came a time when we knew that there was a very hot story somewhere. *The New York Times* had this special unit and because reporters talk a lot to each other, we knew from the *Times* people that they didn't know what was going on in this special unit. But we knew it was something. And Bradlee was a fierce competitor. He didn't know what it was but he didn't want to be beaten.

As I said, previous to this, Bradlee had been putting intense pressure on all of us to find out what the *Times* had. There was a rumor that it had something to do with Cuba. As I mentioned earlier, I called Henry Rowan, who was the head of RAND. I said, "Listen, we hear there's a big story about, we're not sure, but maybe it's Cuba. Do you know of any big story that's about to be broken and involves secret matters?" And he said, "Nothing I know of, of that nature." I then began getting calls from other big papers saying, "We hear there's something going on that's big. Do you know what it is?" People who were friends of mine who worked for papers in Miami or Los Angeles were calling. And I'd say, "We're looking for it ourselves. We don't have it."

So when I made my call from Bill Anderson's apartment, and my deputy said, "The *Times* is printing the secret papers from the Pentagon about Vietnam," I immediately knew we were going to have to do something. When I saw Bradlee the next day, I said, "We've got to report what the *Times* is saying." He hated to do that. I said, "I know, but this is big national news. We've got to say *The New York Times* reported today that they had papers that said thus and so." He hated it. He hated [to acknowledge that they were out front], but he realized that we had an obligation to our audience. We had to say that. So we ran our lead story. "*The New Yor*k *Times* today published information from top-secret documents about the Vietnam War." And then the *Times* was enjoined from the district court in New York from printing anymore, and they appealed.

So after they were stopped, I came out of one of our afternoon editorial meetings. My deputy, a very cool character, said, "Here's something you ought to look at." And it was a message that came in during the news conference. "Call Mr. Boston at this number." And I noticed that the area code was 617, and that is Boston. And I thought someone has told me to call Mr. Boston in Boston—something is funny here. But the message instructed me to call from a secure phone. So I went across the street to the Statler Hotel, which at that time had a bank of public telephone booths. I called that number and someone answered, and asked, "Are you at a secure phone?" I said, "Yes." "All right. Now, here's a number. Go to another secure phone and call this number." So I call that number and Dan Ellsberg answers.

09-00:12:10
Rubens: You recognized his voice, or he immediately said who he was?

09-00:12:13
Bagdikian: I knew it had something to do with the Pentagon Papers because the *Times* had already been enjoined. And he said, “You have to come to Boston, pick up some stuff. But you better get a reservation because it’s commencement time and you can’t get a hotel room easily.” I grew up around Boston and knew the area and ended up getting a room in a sort of fleabag motel there. I flew to Boston. When I checked into the motel—and I had made the reservation, in order to keep this secret, for a Mr. Medford. When I got to the desk of this motel, and when I registered as Medford, the clerk noticed when I opened up my wallet and the credit card didn’t say Medford but Bagdikian. I said, “Oh, I write under the name of Medford.” And the clerk said, “I have a message for you.” And then he gave me an address for a street in Cambridge. And it happened to be, as a matter of fact, in Porter Square where my father had had a very large church.

I took a cab and asked the cab driver to find the number of the house. It was a very dark street and he had to light a match to see the street number. When we got there a woman opened the door and I said, “I’ve been told that there’s something here that I should pick up.” She said, “Who sent you?” I said, “A friend of mine and a friend of yours.” And she said, “Okay. I’ll go get it.” She brought out a box, a very heavy box. It was about three feet long and a foot wide. It was one of the old Xerox boxes for blank paper. And I asked the cab driver to put it in the cab because I have a back that goes out every now and then. And we drove back to the motel.

09-00:15:02
Rubens: Just one box?

09-00:15:03
Bagdikian: One box. And then Dan came into the room. He looked very haggard.

09-00:15:11
Rubens: He came to your motel once you had gotten back?

09-00:15:16
Bagdikian: When I came back, Dan was just coming to this room. He found out what room I was in. And he looked terrible. He had a headache and he said, “Do you have any aspirin?” I got some aspirin at the desk and he took it. And then I showed him the box. He says, “Where’s the other box?” I said, “What other box?” He said, “There were two boxes.” And I said, “Well, you didn’t say that and nobody told me that.” And he said, “We’re going to have to go through all of these things and while we do, we’ll send somebody to get the other box.” So we found somebody who didn’t know what was going on but knew they had to take a taxi to a certain address and pick up a box. When he knocked on the door at the motel, we opened it just enough for him —I think he was just a kid—to push the box in. So now there were two big boxes.

And by this time we had spread papers on the bed. And Dan said, "Now, we've got to separate these out." I said, "Yes, we have to separate these out in terms of stories. Not chronological but the ones that are most important first." He said, "Well, we've got to cut off the code numbers of these cables because these are copies of top secret cables with a code and if you print the code publicly, a hostile nation can take that code number, look at what we printed as a plain language, and figure out the code." He said, "The difference for me," he said, "is ten years or life imprisonment." So as we began cutting out the codes—

09-00:17:28
Rubens: Literally you were cutting them off?

09-00:17:30
Bagdikian: Literally, with a pair of scissors.

09-00:17:31
Rubens: It's not that you promised not to print them, rather than take the time to cut them off?

09-00:17:36
Bagdikian: Yes. By this time, also, Patricia Marx, whom Dan was about to marry, was there with another man, whom I assumed was a lawyer, and he said, "At this point, Pat, I think we'd better leave." So they left. Since then, I've spoken to Pat. We know each other well. And she said she doesn't remember that, but I remember it quite clearly. After they left, we spent more time cutting off all the code numbers on the papers. There were a total of 7,400 pieces of paper in the two boxes and that's a lot of cutting and making sure that we didn't cut into the message. That went on until it was getting to be a little light.

Then we needed to tie up the boxes for me to take back to Washington. And there was only one box that had a rope around it. I went down to the desk at the motel and said, "Do you have some rope or string?" He looked around, "No." I said, "Where can I get it? I need to get a piece of rope." He said, "Well, sometimes when guests come here, they keep their pets tied to the fence outside. You can go look at the fence and see what they have." I went out and there was this wonderful piece of rope tied to the fence, about six feet long. So I took it back up and I tied that around the other box.

09-00:20:12
Rubens: You could get through that many papers?

09-00:20:14
Bagdikian: We worked very fast. And also chronologically. We went through the early ones first. So we had enough so that once we began to publish them, we could processed what remained. And then I had to get back to Washington. I called American Airlines and I made a reservation for two seats in first class for Mr. Medford and box. So I got on the plane carrying those two boxes. There were two things I feared most. One was that my back would go out and I wouldn't

be able to carry the boxes. Secondly, if the rope broke at the airport, either there or in Washington, all of these papers would be all over the airport floor, all marked, "Top secret. Sensitive." The FBI would have me in hand immediately. So I was waiting in line to get on the plane back to Washington and, unfortunately for me, also in line was one of our foreign correspondents who had been in Hong Kong and was returning to Washington—Stanley Karnow. And Stanley took one look at my "baggage" and knew something was up. He wasn't an outstanding correspondent for nothing. He said, "Oh. I was hoping he'd give them to me." So we both got on the plane to Washington.

09-00:22:22
Rubens: Was that a standard newspaper ploy or do you think he knew what they were?

09-00:22:28
Bagdikian: I think he knew because there had been so much about the *Times* being enjoined. It was a continuing story on the front pages and on TV news. By the way, when I was leaving for Boston, Bradlee said, "Say hello to California." He was sure I was going to go to Santa Monica, to RAND, and I didn't say anything. Then when I got ready to return, I called and said, "Ben, I'm at an airport you are very familiar with." He came from around Boston. He said, "Do you have the goods?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, don't come to the office. Bring them to my house." He had a house on M Street in Georgetown. I took a cab there and was about to enter, but his daughter, I think she was seven, had set up a card table for all these people who were coming into their house. She had lemonade for them. I think her name was Marina. And I had a little bit of lemonade and went inside, and that's where everybody was.

09-00:24:15
Rubens: Who was everybody?

09-00:24:19
Bagdikian: Well, once I had the papers and got my air ticket, I had called the staff. I called three of our diplomatic correspondents, ones who covered the State Department, Donald Oberdorfer with whom I worked, and Murrey Marder, and Chalmers Roberts. Chalmers was a very fast writer. So I said, "Chalmers, you do the first story." Now, they were in a library up a set of stairs on the side of Ben Bradlee's living room.

09-00:25:05
Rubens: So you had called them ahead of time and said, "Go to Bradlee's home."

09-00:25:12
Bagdikian: Yes. "Don't go to the office." His living room had a set of stairs with a closed door going to a library. So the papers were in there. And I said, "Chalmers, sort through them. Sort them out for day one, day two, day three. Chalmers, you're going to do day one," because he was fast and he was a diplomatic correspondent. Then I called the head of the copy desk, John Reistrup, and I had him sit at a chair that came out of that library. And as each of the pieces

was processed by the three guys in the library, by the time they were done by the importance for story one, piece by piece, there was a courier. One of the copy boys had a motorcycle. He would take it piece by piece as Reistrup proofread it and bring it to the paper so that he could set it in type, because a lot of things had to go in there and they couldn't do it all at once.

09-00:26:33
Rubens: You were going to print a story about it and were you also going to print some of the documents?

09-00:26:50
Bagdikian: No. We were printing really important excerpts.

09-00:27:51
Rubens: You wrote in your autobiography that as Roberts is finishing with his copy you're having a copy boy get on a motorcycle and take it to the printers. Had Bradlee agreed that this was going to be published?

09-00:28:05
Bagdikian: Oh, yes. He was eager to do that. But the head of the board of directors and the lawyers were concerned. By the way, I didn't mention that on the way to Bradlee's house I took the second box and put it in a closet in my apartment.

09-00:28:36
Rubens: What had you promised Ellsberg you were going to do with that box?

09-00:28:44
Bagdikian: Well, at the moment it wasn't clear what I was to do with the second. Now at Bradlee's house, there was a big argument about whether we should print these secret documents. The editorial writers were very nervous about doing that. They were not happy about doing it. Our lawyers were not happy about our doing it. And they were trying to reach some kind of compromise that would avoid printing this content. Then they said, "Well, they're talking about printing a notice to say we have the papers but we aren't printing them." I said, "Ben, you promised me that if I got them, we were going to print them." He said, "Yes. It's the toughest decision I've ever had to make." And he ordered sandwiches for all of us, and we all argued about printing the important parts of the content of the Pentagon Papers.

09-00:30:42
Rubens: There was the lawyer. Was Katharine Graham there?

09-00:30:48
Bagdikian: No, no. She was never personally there. But George Beebe, the chairman of the board, had come in from New York. He was a very good man. I liked him. He was a good and decent man and I was glad that he was chairman of the board. And when they said that they were going to have a notice saying that we had the papers but we aren't going to print them, that's when the men came out of the library, all very excited, and Bradlee said, "The lawyers are saying we should print something saying we have the papers but we aren't

going to print them." And Oberdorfer said, "That's the shittiest idea I ever heard of." And I said to Beebe, "This is a historic occasion and I think that if we don't print them, it's going to encourage the government to keep secret all the mistakes they make." And he said, "I appreciate what you're saying and I respect what you're saying. But I have to tell you that I have my obligation also. This week we are issuing the first public stock of *The Washington Post*. It's going to be issued by Lazard Frères and it'll be a million dollars worth of stock. Under the law, if you issue a contract with an agency that is going to issue stock, and between the time you make that contract and the stock is actually put on sale, if there is an event, a catastrophic event which could affect the value of that stock, the contract to issue the stock can be canceled." And Beebe said, "I have to think about that."

09-00:33:15
Rubens: The issue was whether you'd be enjoined as *The New York Times* had been -if you would be stopped from publishing. And the indictment alone would constitute this catastrophic—

09-00:33:29
Bagdikian: And if we were indicted, Lazard Frères could cancel the contract. After the three guys came out of the library and were having their sandwiches, the lawyers continued to urge us not to publish. They had always been very good on stories, because the CIA at that time, under Nixon, would continually say that some story we showed the lawyers was going to be a violation of security. But the lawyers had been very good. They'd come in and look at the story and I'd show them my evidence for it and they'd say, "Yes, go ahead and print it." And I knew the Espionage Act by heart. I knew what was a violation of the Espionage Act and what was not. And none of this was of the language that would have been a violation. The lawyers were always against it, and after the three guys came down, they went back to work and we continued to send things down.

And we got finally to the last of the documents for the first story. The courier came for that last sheet of paper and he was going back to the *Post* and he had a motorcycle. I said, "Do you have room for two people on the motorcycle?" He said, "Yes." And apparently it had been raining a little. And we went. I was holding onto him, back of the motorcycle, and we were racing over the railway trolley tracks in the street. I wasn't wearing a helmet, because he didn't have an extra. And I thought, "After all this, we might spin out and I'll crack my head open, and maybe we're not even going to print the Pentagon Papers."

But we got to the paper and as soon as I came in, two things were very special. One was Reistrup, who had gone back. He'd been hearing everything. And when the lawyer said, "The way to assert the right to publish is in the courts." I said, "No. The way to assert the right to publish is to publish." And there was a big poster in the newsroom saying, "You assert the right to

publish by publishing." And I went in. There was a little bit of applause. They said, "They want to see you down in the composing room." So I went down to the composing room and that's where the type is set—all the machinery and linotypes and so forth. We were still doing that. The big metropolitan papers had not yet computerized their production. And it was reassuring because the smell of the ink was a familiar odor after a lifetime in newspapers. And there was the form of page one. I'd learned to read type backward because, of course, the metal was in reverse. That was going to go on a sort of blotter-like paper and then put in a semicircular gadget that would make the rounded form that we clamped on the presses. And I was reading that in reverse and they sent a messenger down, who said, "They want you to go back to Bradlee's house." I said, "Well, what's the matter?" "Well, the lawyers want to see you."

So I went down to Bradlee's house and it was dark and I rang the doorbell and there were two lawyers. Roger Clark and Tony Essay, from our law firm. Our law firm had been headed by William Rogers. It was Dwight, Royall, Harris, Koegel and Caskeky. It was later Rogers and Wells. But Rogers was no longer with that firm because he'd become Nixon's Secretary of State. So these were the guys from his law firm. When I went in, they said, "Whatever your problem with printing, because *The New York Times* has been enjoined and we don't want to be accused of violating this injunction." I said, "That was in the Southern District of New York. We have no injunction in the District of Columbia, so we're not under any legal restraint." They were very, very persistent and I had a very long unpleasant time of it. Roger Clark, with his lesser partner, was talking to Katharine. She was at her mansion where she was giving a banquet for somebody who was retiring. And he would not let me speak to them. "Roger, let me have that phone!" He wouldn't let me make my case.

And then he said, "I have to know your source." I said, "I promised not to tell what the source was." He said, "Well, I've got to know. We can't print it without knowing the source because it could be collusion with *The New York Times*." I said, "There's no collusion. They are in the Southern District of New York. There's nothing in our district that says we can't do it." He said, "But I have to know your source to make sure that there's no collusion with somebody from the *Times*. You have to tell me who it was." Well, when I told a source that I wouldn't tell anybody, I meant it, and this was true throughout my whole career. And I finally said, "Roger, if I tell you, are we talking as a client and lawyer in confidential terms? So you would be obligated not to disclose what I say?" "Yes," he said. So I said, "Will you come over to this corner of the room," because his partner was there by the phone and I didn't want him to hear. He said, "Now, who was your source?" And I told him, "Daniel Ellsberg." He went back to the phone and on the other end, I learned, was his New York office law firm partner, a man named Bill Glendon. He said, "Bill, yes." And I am sure that what Glendon had said was, "Was it Ellsberg?" I was very angry with him. A lot more discussion took place, but

finally as the deadline for our main edition neared, Katharine said yes and we printed that first edition.

09-00:42:01
Rubens: So you went home and got some sleep after two days of being up?

09-00:42:05
Bagdikian: Well, by this time daybreak was coming and I went down to the office. We did get enjoined. And then I went back and got some sleep. And then we were enjoined in the district court and we appealed and it went to the appellate court. It was the Federal District of the District of Columbia, which was the most important appellate court in the country at that time. And the chief judge, was David Bazelon, who was a remarkable man. I knew him because he would call in young journalists from time to time for lunch and they would talk about problems of law and journalism back and forth. A very interesting man. The case then went to his appellate court. The lawyers didn't want anybody in there except one lawyer, Bill Glendon. And I said, "No, there has to be someone who's very familiar with the papers." I said, "The man who knows the most about those Pentagon Papers and Pentagon rules is George Wilson, our Pentagon reporter." A superb reporter.

09-00:43:59
Rubens: How come he hadn't been part of the three that wrote up the story? Why wasn't he there that first night when the papers came in and you had those other three men writing up the story?

09-00:44:15
Bagdikian: Well, because those were dealing with the content. Here was a matter of dealing with the case before the court. And Judge Bazelon said, "Seventy-four hundred pieces of paper. I can't read them all." The men from the Pentagon were there. They're in their black suits and black ties and black socks. Very formal. And George Wilson was always a very relaxed guy. He's a superb reporter. They all had leather attaché cases, and he had one of those leatherette cases they sell in stationary stores—it was filled with all kinds of reports that had been issued by the Pentagon or Congress.

Bazelon said, "Why don't you pick out what you regard as the most sensitive case there is that would harm the country." So they took out one of those and they showed it to our lawyer, Bill Glendon, and showed it to George Wilson and he whispered to me, "I've seen this someplace."

09-00:46:27
Rubens: Were you in that room?

09-00:46:28
Bagdikian: I was there. And he said to Glendon, "Bill, stall for time. Stall for time." He unzipped his case. He had a whole bunch of these Senate documents. The Congress publishes the result of hearings of the committees that are important and are issued to the public. They are distributed to government bookstores, to

embassies. And George whispered to me, "I've seen this someplace." So when Bazelon said, "Give me your worst case," George is looking through and he whispers to Glendon, "Stall for time, Bill. Stall for time." And so Glendon says, "Could you say again what the problem is if we print one of these." He was making up some lawyer talk. And then George Wilson said, "Okay, I've got it." It was a hearing that had been a public hearing before one of the committees in the Senate.

09-00:47:53
Rubens: I think the Fulbright Committee.

09-00:47:57
Bagdikian: Yes. It was the Fulbright Committee.

09-00:48:00
Rubens: He had held congressional hearings on the Vietnam War.

09-00:48:01
Bagdikian: The proceedings were published and it was in every government bookstore and I'm sure in every foreign-country department of the Army. And that really blew up the case. But it went on to the Supreme Court. And Griswold argued for the government. In the meantime, we're waiting for the results. Then Senator Mike Gravel, who had a small committee but who was against the war, was going to read it all into the Federal Register. And he was the chairman of some very unimportant committee on monuments or memorials or something like that. So that he started reading these and the TV people were there and reporters were there, because he's reading them from the secret documents.

09-00:49:29
Rubens: How had he gotten these documents?

09-00:49:32
Bagdikian: Because I had that second box of documents in the apartment that my son and I had put in a closet. I had separated from my wife, and my younger son, Eric, said he wanted to live with me. Gravel told me, "I'll be at the Washington Hotel. Bring them to me and I'll read them into the record." I drove them over to the hotel in my Karmann Ghia and when I got there, I opened the box. He said, "Don't touch them. Don't touch them." Some of his staff came. He said, "Don't you touch them." He said, "I've got immunity but none of you do." So he took the box to his office and he began reading from this set of Pentagon Papers, duplicates of the same which had been enjoined. Here was a member of the Congress in his own little committee room. He began to weep as he read these, and it was on television. It was very dramatic. Finally there were so many TV and radio people there that they had to go to a larger office. It was extremely dramatic and it was going to be in the next day's paper. But the next day's paper had no story about reading them into the public record because the Supreme Court came down with their decision—we won, six to three, on printing the papers. So that was—

09-00:51:22
Rubens: That was a judgment for *The New York Times* and for *The Washington Post*?

09-00:51:27
Bagdikian: Right. *The Washington Post*. The First Amendment protected that and it was not a violation of the Espionage Act.

09-00:51:38
Rubens: Now, later on Daniel Ellsberg, will be tried by the federal government for violating the Espionage Act, because it became known and I guess he admitted that he was the one who had made the papers available.

09-00:51:57
Bagdikian: Yes. Even after he admitted it, I would not tell anybody where I got them. First of all, there had been an ex-reporter of *The New York Times* who had found out something through one of these personal things. It wasn't the Drudge Report but something like that. And his name was Sidney Zion. And he made a public statement in New York that Ellsberg had been the source of these papers. So then once it was decided by the court, it was on a Wednesday, and Gene Patterson, the assistant national editor, was standing on a desk and he said, "Everybody, we won." There was big applause. That was the end of that case.

09-00:53:03
Rubens: Were you called on to testify in defense of Ellsberg when he was on trial? Did you have anything to do with his case?

09-00:53:13
Bagdikian: No. I was not asked to testify.

09-00:53:20
Rubens: Did you have any conversation with Ellsberg during this fifteen days or so that was—

09-00:53:26
Bagdikian: Oh, yes. Ellsberg was afraid they weren't ever going to get published and he kept nagging me. "When are you going to do it? When are you going to do it?" And I said, "We're going to do it. I've got the word that we can do it," and it finally did come out.

09-00:53:45
Rubens: How many different excerpts did you put in the paper? I think *The New York Times* had something like seventeen different excerpts but I couldn't find any information about how many the *Post* had.

09-00:54:03
Bagdikian: Well, we did summaries rather than literal repetition of the cables, because we weren't going to devote pages and pages and pages to that.

09-00:54:42
Rubens: You wrote something—it was in the *Columbia Journalism Review,* September/October 1971: "What Did We Learn"? You argued that "the Supreme Court decision was not the triumphant end, but the start of a struggle." Then you point out the cluster of issues that remained unresolved: the legitimacy of the war; deception by the government; secrecy in government; and freedom of the press.

09-00:54:52
Bagdikian: Yes. The decision was six-three and that was not a comfortable margin in that it was not an issue that would go away. They would continue to try to get the *Times* or the *Post*, which they hated. They were in favor of super secrecy, even in violation of the public information law. So that it continued to be a hostile relationship.

09-00:57:59
Rubens: I'm going to have to have to change the tape.

[End Audio File 9]

[Begin Audio File 10]

10-00:00:00
Rubens: This is tape two of June 22nd.

10-00:00:07
Bagdikian: And the Nixon administration remained very hostile. We would have executive luncheons once a week at *The Washington Post*, where the top editors would sit with Katharine Graham, have hors d'oeuvres and have a lunch served with usually a guest. A guest was frequently a high government official or a high corporate official. I remember Erlichman and Haldeman came as the guests to one of these luncheons. And they entered with an arrogance that was almost laughable. They came in as though they were being nice to a bunch of Cub Scouts. They each had a sheet of paper they took out of their jacket pocket with an indictment of all the bad or inaccurate stories they thought that the *Post* had run about the Nixon White House and about them. He said, "Let's start with the first one." They were so arrogant. They paid very little attention to what we had to say.

10-00:02:03
Rubens: Was this lambasting the *Post*?

10-00:02:09
Bagdikian: Oh, they would bring, as I said, examples of what we had printed that was wrong, and it would turn out that either we hadn't printed it or else we were right and it had been proven right.

10-00:02:24
Rubens: So why was the Nixon Administration so threatened by *The New York Times* and the *Post*? Nixon had sort of unleashed his vice-president Spiro Agnew,

who had called the liberal media "the nattering nabobs of negativism." I guess that was William Safire's phrase. He was the speechwriter for Agnew. What was it about *The Washington Post* that was so threatening to the Nixon Administration?

10-00:03:26
Bagdikian: I think it had something to do with the fact that Nixon, who was, in fact, a very intelligent man—he was very bright. He was not a dumb bell. But he nevertheless had a streak of paranoia in him. He was always afraid that he wasn't liked. And it was a self-fulfilling kind of paranoia. He was not very well liked. For example, when he was Vice-President to Eisenhower, Eisenhower sometimes openly showed his contempt for him and it increased his sense of being sort of persecuted by a hostile world around him. He was a tragic figure in the end because he was not a dumbbell but he had this constant fear that he wasn't liked and it was self-fulfilling.

10-00:04:47
Rubens: Well, of course, it is the publishing of the Pentagon Papers that leads to the Watergate break-in that leads to looking in Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist office for papers and for information in the Democratic headquarters at the Watergate.

10-00:05:03
Bagdikian: He wanted to know what they had that would reflect on him. In a number of these escapades, you would think that people who do this sort of thing would be more clever. Now, maybe the clever ones never get revealed, like so many clumsy ones, like these people they hired to break into the Watergate. Well, it was a stupid thing to do. It had consequences. Turned out that they were not regarded as important things when the Nixon people did things of this sort. So it was covered by a couple of people from the metropolitan staff, not the more senior staff. And among them Carl Bernstein. And as they covered it and they heard the words CIA and they said, "Ahh. There's something here that's not just ordinary breaking in to steal jewelry or something. This is political." And they started to investigate.

10-00:06:41
Rubens: The investigation into Nixon's dirty tricks.

10-00:06:45
Bagdikian: Yes. And that ended up with finally Nixon leaving the White House.

10-00:06:55
Rubens: Now, the drama over the publication of the Pentagon Papers is really from June 13th to June 30th. The Supreme Court decision comes down on June 30th. It was certainly on the fast track. It so quickly went through the district court to the appellate court to the Supreme Court. The Ellsberg case took years before it came to the court. That's an example of the government capacity to act immediately.

10-00:07:33
Bagdikian: Yes. When Ellsberg was waiting for *The New York Times* for four months, nobody knew anything about these. Nothing had been published. Once it was published that these were the secret documents and that they proved that the generals and others in Vietnam had lied or had been deluded, self-deluded and it showed that what had been a matter of very intense public controversy about the war in Vietnam. Did we leave it? Were we winning? Were we not winning? And what it showed, of course, was that the generals had really convinced themselves of a fantasy that we were winning. When I went to RAND, one of the things that Harry Rowan wanted to do was to reexamine the prisoner interviews from the Vietnamese because the initial report was they all, the North Vietnamese POWs, were saying, "Oh, the South is winning. The United States is winning. We're losing." And it didn't sound right. And Harry asked Dan to go over those and other people did and found that it was totally wrong, that these interviews showed that these people were not beaten. The North was unaffected by us and we were the ones who were losing. So there had been a loss of confidence in the administration.

10-00:09:40
Rubens: Now, you had no idea when you were at RAND that Ellsberg was copying these papers?

10-00:09:47
Bagdikian: No.

10-00:09:48
Rubens: But he had come to you because he and several other people at RAND wanted to write a letter to *The New York Times* to protest the war?

10-00:10:00
Bagdikian: There are two things I remember about that. There were seven or eight people in RAND who realized that the truth wasn't coming out about what was happening in Vietnam. There was unclassified information from the field that conflicted with the reports from the generals. They asked Harry Rowan, "Would you mind if we write a letter saying that we need a reexamination of this because it has not been done properly?" And it was very unusual at RAND to make a public statement, because they do secret work, for the most part. And he said, "All right. Just make sure that you speak just for yourself." And they did write this letter.

10-00:11:15
Rubens: But they had consulted with you? Hadn't Ellsberg come to you and asked what would be good form or what would be—

10-00:11:20
Bagdikian: Ellsberg hung around my office a lot and he kept asking me about newspapers. "What's the most influential newspaper?" And I kept telling him. Then he'd ask, "What things get the most attention of the public? Is it television? Is it the newspapers? Which newspapers?" And I told him the

same thing over and over. Now I knew him. I met him at parties. There were a lot of parties with people at RAND. A lot of them were gourmet cooks.

10-00:12:09
Rubens: Was a letter from them published?

10-00:12:13
Bagdikian: They did publish the letter. It was not a startling letter. It simply quoted scholars on the history, as I remember, of Vietnam and said that the media and the government were not paying attention to some available information. But nothing that would have violated the secrecy of whatever RAND was doing.

10-00:12:56
Rubens: But I was wondering if somebody figured out, remembering that letter, that Dan Ellsberg might have been the one who had given the papers to *The New York Times*.

10-00:13:10
Bagdikian: I don't think so. For example, there were a couple of Quakers at RAND and there were people who knew that much of what was being published as official was incorrect. They were specialists, experts—they'd been in Vietnam. They had examined various aspects of the war but were very loath to be public because that was not how things were done at RAND. [People at RAND] knew everything about everybody. I remember how startled I was. I came in one morning and one of the guards said, "Happy birthday, Ben." They knew my birthday and they remembered that.

10-00:14:56
Rubens: Well, I have a lot of questions to ask you about the Pentagon Paper period. For one thing, that night that you're with Dan Ellsberg, he asks you to take that second box to Mike Gravel. I don't think you knew Gravel. And you say that you felt that that made you very uncomfortable. That you felt that that was a violation of your role as a journalist. What was it that troubled you?

10-00:15:32
Bagdikian: Well, I'm trying to think now. Gravel wanted the papers to read into the Congressional Record.

10-00:15:46
Rubens: Yes. But it's Daniel Ellsberg who asks you to take them to Gravel, and he had asked many senators—

10-00:15:57
Bagdikian: When he was afraid that they might lose the case he figured if he could get a member of the Congress to read it into the federal—

10-00:16:11
Rubens: Well, he had already asked Fulbright, who had said no. And there were several other people that I didn't realize he had asked, and they all said no.

10-00:16:21
Bagdikian: Well, I knew that Fulbright had publicly come out against war and now he did not want to go through a second round of public criticism.

10-00:16:22
Rubens: He has asked McGovern. He has asked Charles Mathias and he has asked Pete McCloskey. And all of them said no. So it's a wonder that people didn't know that Dan Ellsberg had these papers and that he was trying to do something with them.

10-00:16:47
Bagdikian: Well, there were people who didn't know how this was all going to come out and they were being asked to do something that had a high level of secrecy and now the courts were involved, and they were playing safe. Gravel, on the other hand—

10-00:17:16
Rubens: He was young.

10-00:17:17
Bagdikian: Right, yes. And he's from Alaska and he had an inconsequential committee appointment, and I think he saw this as an opportunity to really get into the public eye. Now, he was cheated because what he did was eclipsed the day the Supreme Court came down in support of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

10-00:17:46
Rubens: But what he had read into the record, Beacon Press published it, and it became the most comprehensive compendium of the documents.

10-00:18:00
Bagdikian: There is a recent film now called *The Most Dangerous Man in America*. It's really a biography of Dan Ellsberg and focuses a lot on the Pentagon Papers. And part of that footage is the footage of Mike Gravel reading the documents and weeping, and it's a very powerful part of that film.

Beacon Press published the whole four volumes of the Pentagon Papers, was also my publisher for a number of books. As we sit here, I can see the yellow volumes from the Beacon Press of the Pentagon Papers.

10-00:21:50
Rubens: Did *The New York Times* wait until the Supreme Court decision to do any more reporting on the Pentagon Papers?

10-00:22:03
Bagdikian: I don't remember that they did. I think by then everybody was printing stories about the aftermath of the publication of the Pentagon Papers.

10-00:22:44
Rubens: Katharine Graham says in her autobiography that James Reston of the *Times* and the editor of *The* Boston *Globe*, Tom Winship, called her up and said that it was very brave, that it was a good thing that she had published the papers.

10-00:23:05
Bagdikian: Yes. She was a great admirer of James Reston and Tom Winship, editor of *The* Boston *Globe*. I think they were good friends and she was very much influenced by him. That would mean a great deal to her.

10-00:23:21
Rubens: Well, she actually says that she was at a wedding at James Reston's house on a Saturday night when she learns from him that the next day there's going to be something in the paper that has to do with Vietnam, with a secret war in Vietnam, and that she calls up Bradlee and tells him. I don't know if you remember this part. Is that when Bradlee then called you?

10-00:23:55
Bagdikian: Well, I think that was part of the whole eagerness to do something that would pick up where the *Times* had stopped. We always tried to beat the *Times* anyways. Bradlee was a competitor. Katharine liked Bradlee. Bradlee knew how to deal with Katharine. Bradlee can be one of the most charming men alive. He could say to Katharine, "Gee, Momma—" And I won't repeat everything he'd say, because my younger relatives wouldn't want their grandfather saying bad words.

10-00:24:47
Rubens: Well, but the public ought to know for the historical record. You ought to tell it like it is.

10-00:24:55
Bagdikian: All right. "Momma, we have a real fucker in this one." I think Katharine liked that, being one of the boys. And then when I left the *Post*, we were not on good terms and I went to have my final lunch with Ben and it was a very unexciting lunch. We were both restrained. He was restrained. We tried to talk about nothing of any consequence. We ended up not liking each other very much. But the moment we entered the newsroom after that gloomy lunch, he put his arm around me and we sauntered in as though we were the greatest of pals. So he was a great actor.

10-00:26:11
Rubens: How long do you remain the assistant editor of the national news?

10-00:26:20
Bagdikian: My recollection is it would have been a little over two years as assistant managing editor for national news and then better part of a year as ombudsman.

10-00:26:41
Rubens: Why were you moved to the position of ombudsman?

10-00:28:51
Bagdikian: I'd been advocating for the idea of newspaper ombudsmen since the 1950s. I'd been writing articles about that. The Swedes had them. I had an article about that, I think, in *The Atlantic* in 1957. When the atmosphere in the newsroom became so unpleasant, it was a kind of mutual decision: we needed to deal with it. Katharine suggested it. But she wasn't pleased always with what I wrote as ombudsman. It was not very popular. The *Times* was dead set against the idea of having an ombudsman on staff, and she was very much influenced by *Time*' policy. They thought, "Our editors know what's news and they don't need anybody else to tell us."

10-00:30:06
Rubens: And the ombudsman is supposed to represent the reader.

10-00:30:39
Bagdikian: Yes. And I'd tried to make that clear. I thought the ombudsman should not be a formal member of the news staff because he's writing criticism of his colleagues or he's writing praise of his colleagues, and that produces all kinds of problems. That he should be regarded as a distinguished retired editor. Eventually they adopted that. They either got an academic or they got an ex-editor. As ombudsman, I wasn't terribly happy because what I saw as problems is not what they had had in mind. But in the end they did what I felt was the right thing to do. And when I left the *Post*, both sides had a feeling that it was time for me to leave. By that time I had had too many run-ins with the divided loyalties within the newsroom

10-00:33:06
Rubens: Now, for a brief while after the Pentagon Papers, did the staff come together? Was there more of a spirit of cohesion or excitement because of the victory?

10-00:33:20
Bagdikian: No. If anything, things got to be more difficult because they had a union. They had difficulty with the union. The staff couldn't come to an agreement with the management and the management hired an executive in the *Post* hierarchy whose specialty was breaking unions. They had an incident after I left when they gave the pressmen a contract that was insulting and the pressmen foolishly threw some wrenches into the presses before they left. Katharine immediately hired one of the big PR firms in New York to publicize what they did, and it was very anti-union, of course. And then later I wrote that this was a problem, because the question is: how do the big papers move to computerization the way small papers had? And that would mean that the typographical union would go out of business. I could see two ways to go about things. One was to give the union an insulting contract, take it or leave it, and have a fight with the union. The other was to say you can have any job in this organization that you can do and if you can do this, you can stay and be an employee and get paid under the terms of everybody else; or you can leave with a pension. So some papers did it peacefully and some did it with very hard feelings and sometimes violence. And the *Post* did not do it the way I

thought they should have. They had a replacement set of press operators in a building next to the *Post*. Then they said to their pressmen, "Now, take this contract, or we have your replacements next door." Well, they got angry and threw wrenches in. That was a way of picking a fight with them. And my feeling was that's not the way to do it.

10-00:36:42
Rubens: Do you think your experience at the *Post* radicalized you?

10-00:36:48
Bagdikian: No. I had always been not so much a radical as an advocate for social justice. I'm a liberal. My feeling is you make people feel what it's like to be in the disadvantaged part of the society so that my working philosophy and practice has always been read all the authoritative books and then live the life of the people you're describing. Be there. Really live with them. Be with them.

10-00:37:34
Rubens: So pretty soon you're going to be looking at the role of prisoners and what prisoners are experiencing. Is it you covering the Attica rebellion that moves you in that—

10-00:37:52
Bagdikian: As a matter of fact, I did that cover while I was at the *Post.*

10-00:38:06
Rubens: Shall we leave that for next time?

10-00:38:07
Bagdikian: Yes.

10-00:38:08

[End of Audio File 10]

Interview #6: July 13, 2010
[Begin Audio File 11]

11-00:00:00
Rubens: Today is July 13th and I'm talking with Ben Bagdikian in his home. I want to know about your reaction to the Attica Prison rebellion in September, l971.

11-00:00:20
Bagdikian: First of all, there was a commission appointed to look into Attica and it turned out that there were very brutal conditions within Attica. And that led to an examination of prisons around the country. I already was familiar with some of those conditions because I belonged to a group that had been trying to develop more humane standards for the prisons nationally.

11-00:00:54
Rubens: What group was that?

11-00:00:56
Bagdikian: I had close relations with two prison reform groups. One was the National Council on Crime and Delinquency [NCCD]. The other was a national prison project that was a sponsored by the ACLU and it was led by a friend of mine. That had become an issue because it turned out there were abuses in prisons all over the country. I had written about prisons and looked into it, I had friends who were involved in organizations that had some influence in trying to bring about prison reforms. So I suggested to Bradlee that we do something on this. And he was open to that. He also had one black member of the metropolitan staff who was relatively inexperienced and he wanted to have some sign that *The Washington Post* was not prejudiced against blacks, because there had been some complaints by blacks about that. Of course, Washington was a city that was three-quarters black and race relations had become a national issue. So he took one of the blacks in the metropolitan staff—

11-00:02:25
Rubens: This was Leon Dash?

11-00:02:27
Bagdikian: Leon Dash. And Bradlee said, "Why don't you work with him and sort of show him the ropes?" And so what I suggested was that he cover the District of Columbia's local jail, and I would advise him from time to time. Then I would look at the national picture. I read the literature on it and then I interviewed many wardens and ex-wardens, psychologists, psychiatrists, and organizations that were working seriously and with much support to do something about prisons.

11-00:03:22
Rubens: So you were given some time off from your job as assistant managing editor of the national desk?

11-00:03:31
Bagdikian: What I don't recall is whether I had already become an ombudsman. I don't think I would have left the national desk to do that. I would have assigned somebody else to do it. So I was probably ombudsman when that happened. I did a lot of interviewing around the country. I visited prisons and I talked to ex-prisoners. I talked to wardens, psychologists, read the basic books. People had been trying to reform prisons from the nineteenth century on. And I had a great deal of background on what the prison system was and how it was working, which were the better systems and which were the worst systems. There was one system that was a relatively rational kind of humane system, in, oddly enough, South Carolina. I spent about a month doing interviews about conditions in prisons and the prison reform movement,

After I had done all of that, I decided that I needed to become a prisoner. It's one thing is to talk to someone behind bars, another thing to talk to the reform people. Some reformers were rather theoretical, others very practical. But I wanted to have a personal experience of incarceration. And that was not easy. I almost did it in Oklahoma where there was a reform governor and director of corrections. And at the last minute they said, "You can't come down. Somehow the grapevine had said someone is coming down to be in a prison, and you can't come down. It's too dangerous."

Another place where there was a very reform-minded director of corrections is Pennsylvania. I went to see them and the attorney general and they were open to it because they had read some of the things I had written and realized that I was not a newcomer to this issue. So the attorney general and the director of corrections agreed that they would introduce me into the prison. I said, "Look, we have had stories in the newspapers about reporters and even judges who would spend a night in a prison simply to get a story or a real experience." But everybody knew that they were outsiders. And they were shaken by just spending one night in a cell. I said, "I don't want to do that. I don't want anybody in the prison, neither the warden nor the prisoners, to know that I am not a regular prisoner." So we worked out a very careful scenario. The attorney general agreed, he said, "All right." He had a yellow pad. And he wrote two or three pages of notes that established every possible scenario and all the ways in which State of Pennsylvania was not responsible for anything that happened to me.

11-00:09:12
Rubens: Did he help you come up with your cover story?

11-00:09:15
Bagdikian: No, no. All he wanted was to make sure that the state was not responsible for me. I said, "Look, the way this is written, if you pulled out a gun and shot me right now, you'd be able to get off innocent." He said, "Well, I'd do my best," and we all laughed. And then the director of corrections and I worked out a cover story. The cover story was that I was in a Pennsylvania jail near Gettysburg, where I had gone after attending a racetrack and had a few drinks

and got in a fight with a man. I punched him and he fell down, struck his head on the metal base of the barstool and died. And so I was immediately taken to the county prison. I wore prison clothes. And then because I was being held for a capital offense, you don't stay in a county jail for that, you stay in a prison. And the two officers in a confidential unit of the Pennsylvania State Police—these are the units that go to other places in the state to find who the corrupt cops are and things like that—they were in on it. They were going to deliver me to a maximum-security prison in the hills of Pennsylvania.

11-00:11:12
Rubens: This is Huntington State Correctional Institute?

11-00:11:15
Bagdikian: Yes, it was a maximum-security penitentiary. And they said, "This man is being transferred for his protection," which meant that I had been threatened by another prisoner inside the jail. I was to be held while awaiting trial for murder. So I went in.

11-00:11:38
Rubens: With a false last name.

11-00:11:41
Bagdikian: False last name but as close as possible to my real name so that there wouldn't be any likelihood that they would somehow find I was totally different from what I appeared. I had an overnight kit from which I removed identification but I had my medication and some sleeping pills and the prison doctor had to see it. He was a very contemptuous person. Opened it up, saying, "Well, I don't see anything there. You're not going to be able to commit suicide with any of these things, unfortunately, so here, you can keep that."

11-00:12:31
Rubens: This is December 17, 1971. And you were prisoner 5006, Benjamin Barsamian.

11-00:12:42
Bagdikian: Right. Now, I happened to know a very good friend whose name was Barsamian, but he lived in Boulder, Colorado, so that wasn't a problem. There was a row of cells on the first floor of that wing and then there's a second floor row of cells. When it was time for meals, there's a single bar that is pulled back and that opens up all the doors to the cells. Prisoners would say, "The bar's moving, the bar's moving," and you'd go down and you'd line up and most of the people in that line of cells knew each other because you went to a part of the dining room. There was self-segregation. The blacks ate at one table, the whites at another table. And so I was the new man in our cellblock and at our mess table. So we had an institutional meal, which was perfectly okay, and the dessert was a paper cup of ice cream with a wooden paddle. And the man opposite me, a very tough looking guy, took his paddle with a scoop of ice cream, lapped it and then said, "Here, have some ice cream." I said, "No, thanks." And he said, "You think my spit isn't good enough for

you, huh?" And I figured I'm going to have trouble with this guy. And we marched back to our cells. His cell was in the second tier directly over me. And as we stood in front of our cells waiting for them to move the bar that would open the doors, he dropped a match on me from above. And I thought, "I'm going to have trouble with this guy." Well, it turned out he was my best friend in the prison in the end.

Everyone notices that you are a new man in the line. There was an elderly prisoner who I think was in forever. Must have been a capital offense. And there's a mirror at a corner at a tilt so guards can see down two adjoining cellblocks. And as we were marching, this old man who had been there forever, whispered to me, "Did you do it?" Well, that was stupid, of course. The one thing everybody's afraid of is a stool pigeon, someone who's trying to get some information from you, feed it to the guards and get favors. So I knew that this was sort of a dumb guy and didn't even bother saying yes or no. But what was striking—when we would march, and I could see myself in that mirror, I didn't recognize myself. There was a lack of stimulation in prison, you have steel bars, steel toilets, steel cot, steel sink, glass and concrete. Within a very short time the lack of stimulus ages you. And I saw myself from a mirror as we marched to the mess hall. I did not recognize myself. I wondered, "Who is that old man?"

11-00:17:35
Rubens: How many nights were you there?

11-00:17:38
Bagdikian: I'd been there one night when that happened. Overnight. And I remember, though, that when I woke up early at five o'clock, it was getting light. There are small windows at the top of the open space in front of the cellblocks, open window. And when I looked out, a bird flew within sight of that window. It was one of the most uplifting sights I had ever experienced. It was a figure of freedom and flight and wonder of the outside world.

11-00:18:28
Rubens: Did you have a cellmate?

11-00:18:35
Bagdikian: No. They were all single-occupant cells.

11-00:18:40
Rubens: And you knew that you were going to be in for six nights?

11-00:18:45
Bagdikian: No. I was going to be there for two weeks. I think it was two weeks. At which time that confidential unit of the state police would come and say, "Okay, we've got to deliver him to the court." But anyway, that was a very long time. At the end of the day, there'd be a recreation period—there was a big television set up on the corner of the open space in front of the cells and the prisoners could vote what program they wanted to see. Overwhelmingly, they

picked shows like "Hee Haw," which was a show about southern music. And that's the kind of program they watched all the time. Or they would vote for a crime program. And so I'd watch sometimes. But then mostly I'd want to read. They had a small library.

You have to go through a kind of clearance so they could find out more about you. Then they give you a job. My biggest job was in the laundry. I think they made license plates, too. No, they stamped steel bookshelves for federal offices. But I was given a chance to clean. There's a classroom. They would give lessons to people who were willing to learn to read and study. I cleaned the blackboard, I remember. There was also the library there. So I took a couple of books—I read Simone de Beauvoir, then I began reading all of that associated literature.

And the man who had offered me the ice cream and turned out to be my best friend, he gave me an old copy of *Time* magazine. I had once had my picture in *Time*, and this was an old issue. I paged through it, thinking, "Please, not this issue," and it wasn't. I read every single word in that old issue of *Time*.

11-00:23:00
Rubens: Were you able to take notes in prison?

11-00:23:08
Bagdikian: Well, I'm trying to think whether I could take notes. I think I may have made a few notes and put them in my shoes. But just sort of two or three words that would bring something alive the way notes do after an experience like that.

We would have an exercise period and we'd go to thirty-foot walls with guards with guns in each of the corners and you could walk around this open space under the walls. And I sat down with a young guy from Montana who had killed a man. We found a place where you're out of sight to sit and talk. Out of sight of the men in the corners with their guns. And he started telling me about his whole life. We sort of confided in each other. He confided in me. They all were kind of curious what a middle-aged man would be doing in prison, because most of them were young. I had my story down pat.

Then they would play basketball. There was a black team, self-segregated, and a white team. They're all young, vigorous guys. Then the toughest leader of each group would pick the men for their team. The black captain would pick all blacks. They'd say okay. They'd pick the tallest guy. And the white captain would do the same thing. When they got through picking everybody, I was left all alone, because here's this middle-aged man who's not going to be a good member of the team. But the white captain said, "Okay, Pops, you can come play with us." Well, I'd played basketball in college. Not intercollegiate, but I played a lot of basketball and I had tutored a guy in English who was a basketball star and he taught me about shooting baskets in tricky ways. So we started playing. And after a while, the captain of my team, the big white guy

said, “Hey, man, you play just like a nigger,” which was a great compliment because these other guys spent their whole lives in city playgrounds shooting baskets. That was our recreation, and always welcome because you get out in the fresh air, but it was bittersweet, because in the far distance you could see higher mountains.

11-00:26:44
Rubens: How long did you end up staying there? You wrote a series that ran in *The Washington Post* and then published a book called *Shame of the Prisons*. And in that book you say you spent six nights. But you think you spent longer?

11-00:27:05
Bagdikian: Could have been six nights and it could have been that the cover story covered another week in the county jail that I was transferred from, and I get the cover story and the actuality mixed up because I worked so hard to memorize the cover. So whatever the record shows is correct. When they came to pick me up, they picked me up as though they were going to return me for trial, but I was free.

11-00:27:40
Rubens: The series and the book are very compelling. You talk about all the different aspects of prison life: homosexuality, racism, guard-prisoner relations. It’s a book that is really worth reading.

11-00:28:03
Bagdikian: For example, on Saturdays the population—that’s what they call the prisoners, “the population”—would have entertainment. They had a theater, a hall, where they showed a movie. It was the time everybody came together. They tried ordinarily not to have prisoners gather all in a group. But they had lots of guards surrounding it. When they all got together in this room they looked around and they saw other people. “Hey, Charlie, I haven’t seen you since Iowa State.” “Oh, where have you been?” “Well, I went down to Mississippi State.” “Boy, don’t go into Parchman. Don’t go to Mississippi.” And they’re talking about going to Oklahoma State, Montana State, Massachusetts State. What they’re talking about is not universities but prisons. And I thought, these are the universities of the bad-luck people in our society.

11-00:29:13
Rubens: I guess you got out of prison some time before Christmas, sometime in that period, and then the series runs in January and February of 1972. Sometime in December and into January, you’re writing up the results of your experience. One of the things that you spend a lot of time talking about is the recidivism rate.

11-00:29:44
Bagdikian: Yes. With one exception. The prison experience was, and I suspect still is, that if you are found guilty of a serious offense, you are put in the prison, you either spend a day in the laundry at a prison and then you watch movies at night and at the end of the time you spend five, six, seven, eight, ten, twenty

years, they hand you your civilian clothes in a suitcase, maybe a ten-dollar bill, and open up the gate and let you out. Nothing has changed, with one exception, which at that time was South Carolina, which was the most sensible system that I ran into in my research on prisons generally. A prisoner with a serious offense, but not a capital offense, would spend one month in a miserable Civil War prison and if he had no other offenses, no fights, was obedient, they put him in a facility that was based near his hometown with twenty men in a barracks and a guard, who would help them find jobs. Usually it was a locked facility. It was like an Army barracks but with bars. And this was in their hometowns. He would find employers and try and convince them to take someone for a job. I spent some time there.

For example, there was one employer—it was a textile mill and they ran this cloth through the pressers stamping the happy face on it. The employer agreed to take this one prisoner and the prisoner came out. He was terrified. He'd never had any kind of responsibility like that. His job was to control the valves on the barrels of paint—it had the yellow for the happy face, the black for the expression, and he had to be adjusting the colors all the time. And he was frightened by this moving textile machinery and he's supposed to control these things. Never had had a job like that. And the job finder said, "Take it easy now. Take it easy." And the owner said, "Just listen. Never mind. We have a lot of spoiled cloth, but we make use of it." And he gradually got the confidence and adjusted the colors properly.

Then he was in the barracks at night. And after a month, when everything went well, he was permitted to go to either his family, if he had a stable family, which wasn't always true, or to another family who would agree to take him in. I think the state paid them. And he did get this job, which was making these happy faces. And he made enough money, so he bought an old car, he got a girlfriend, they got engaged, they got married, and he went on to a normal life. Before they let him out, though, in that last ninety days he was serving, he was in an open facility. He could have walked out any time he wanted. They had counselors to tell him what agencies existed in his city and where they were and what they could do about, let's say, getting some medical care, what they could do about getting a job, what they could do about finding people who were interested in the same thing he was interested in, for friendship and support. It was the most sensible systems I ran across and in the state of South Carolina, of all places.

Now, of course, after that had been very successful for a while, what always happens—something like that happened in the fifties in California. It was so successful that what's called the Peace Lobby, policemen, guards and so forth, lobbied the legislature to close down these places.

11-00:35:30

Rubens: Well, they were considered too costly, also.

11-00:35:34
Bagdikian: And it was called coddling prisoners. And being tough on crime was always a safe slogan for running for office. So these efforts at improvement, some of which were completely rational, completely effective, were killed by the politics of the so-called Peace Lobby, and politicians who could be always saying we're going to be tough on crime.

11-00:36:08
Rubens: You mentioned that it was ironic that you ended up in California. Crime was rising faster than anywhere in the nation, and Reagan, who was not soft on crime, was experimenting with letting prisoners out early, and also mental health patients. So that's an example, you're absolutely right, there in the early seventies where a lot of those programs were being obliterated. And you wrote about that. Do you remember the reception to the series in *The* Washington *Post*? Was Bradlee pleased with it?

11-00:36:52
Bagdikian: It got a very large reaction. Yes.

11-00:36:55
Rubens: Whose idea was it to turn the series into a book?

11-00:37:01
Bagdikian: The paper. The paper had it published. Because I had done really a national survey of prisons and examples of places where they had interesting programs and what some of the programs were. Simon & Schuster put out a book, which in effect was Leon Dash's story. But that was one chapter. All the rest was my own.

11-00:37:38
Rubens: It comes out as a paperback in May of '72'–the Pocketbook edition. Was there a hardback with Simon & Schuster?

11-00:37:53
Bagdikian: So far as I know, no.

11-00:37:55
Rubens: Now, is there anything more that you want to say about that book? Any money that was made on that book must have gone to the paper?

11-00:38:18
Bagdikian: Yes. But I think it was a very useful book to put out and I'm glad they published it.

11-00:38:34
Rubens: And then a few years later you're going to do another book on prisons. *Caged*.

11-00:38:40
Bagdikian: Yes.

11-00:38:42
Rubens: But there's no direct link between this and that?

11-00:38:45
Bagdikian: No. I had a foundation grant for that.

11-00:38:47
Rubens: All right. So we'll get to that. I did want to know if there was a particular story about how the man who dropped the match and licked the spoon became your friend.

11-00:39:23
Bagdikian: I can't remember that. But I do remember he once told me–and he was very proud of the fact: "You know, I had a red Corvette and I didn't owe a penny on it. It was the first time I drove a car that had no payments to be made. I owned it free and clear." I said, "Where'd you get the money?" And he looked at me, puzzled. He went out and robbed a bank.

What I'm holding here is totally unrelated. It was in April of '72. It was a conference at Harvard Kennedy School of Government on national priorities. And a black group had made their statement first. And their statement said, and I think I quoted from it, "Mass communications in this country have been used primarily for the purpose of oppressing non-whites and entertaining whites." And my response was, "I think that is untrue. I think it's important to correct. We're all here to find prescriptions to remedy disease, so we need to be as precise as possible in diagnosing diseases. The overall disease that brings us together is racism in American society. But in this paper we're talking about the mass media. There is no question that the mass media in this country reflects the racism that infects us, both conscious and unconscious racism." So I disagreed that the purpose of the mass media was to subject the blacks. It simply reflected general social values.

11-00:41:46
Rubens: And how was it that you were invited to speak there? Was that because you were the ombudsman for *The Washington Post*?

11-00:41:55
Bagdikian: I don't know. It may have been because of the series on prisons. I've forgotten why they had asked me but I was in an original panel of three or four people who presented a paper, to which a larger group would then respond, Q&A and independent statements.

11-00:42:25
Rubens: And you were one of those respondents?

11-00:42:27
Bagdikian: I was one of the three or four people who presented a prepared paper. I was, of course, representing *The Washington Post*. I was the national editor. The black reporters at the *Post* on the city staff had brought an EEOC [Equal Opportunity Commission] suit against the paper saying blacks had not been

treated correctly, had not been promoted at a deserved rate compared to whites. When I was asked at this seminar at Harvard about this statement, which had been made publicly, "Do you think that's true?" and I said, "Well, I don't think *The Washington Post* deliberately does it, but I think it is a reflection. Blacks don't advance to very high positions. There aren't any black editors, there aren't any black assistant editors. So to a certain extent, that's true." When I got back to Washington and I got to the paper, my assistant said, "Bradlee wants to see you right away." He had the AP story. He said, "Did you say this?" I said, "Well, they took it out of a larger statement, but yes, that part of the statement I did make." He said, "You, my own lieutenant, making that statement against your own paper and you know it isn't true." He was raging. And he said, "I want to talk to you." We went out for lunch to the Washington Hotel. It was a very chilly lunch. And he said, "I'm sick and tired of everybody going out and people who have responsibilities, like you, making statements that put us in the worst possible light." He was very angry. But the moment we stepped into the newsroom, he put his arm around me—he was a great actor and he understood symbolism—"See, we have it all ironed out." But it wasn't really all ironed out.

11-00:45:56
Rubens: So how much longer did you remain with the *Post*? This is April '72. By June of '72 the first reporting by Woodward and Bernstein is in *The Washington Post* on the Watergate break-in. Do you remember being there at the time?

11-00:46:23
Bagdikian: I don't remember. I know that Bernstein used to come over from the city side and beg me to get an assignment on the national staff. I said, "Carl, I'll give you something some time. You'll get in the paper." And I may have given him one very small assignment. And he was always sort of nagging to get something more than that. And when they went to cover this hearing in Watergate, they were smart enough, when they heard "CIA," they looked into it and that blossomed into that whole Watergate investigation and they did a terrific job.

11-00:47:13
Rubens: Why don't we discuss, how did your term as ombudsman come to an end?

11-00:47:29
Bagdikian: Well, I was not the first ombudsman. My predecessor's national editor was the ombudsman. And he would simply report. He would read all the letters to the editor and report to Katharine Graham that the *Post* was going to lose circulation because all the writing was too liberal. Well, he was not a liberal and he was always against the liberals on the paper. So when I became ombudsman I read the letters and they were divided. And I would report what the division was, what the critics said, where readers stood on the political spectrum. I also suggested to Bradlee that I write an occasional piece about the newspaper business. During that period, there were two other papers in the city. There was a tabloid that had been there a long time. This is not counting

the Moonie paper. The tabloid and *The Washington Evening Star*, which had been there a long time. And they both went out of business while I was the ombudsman.

So it was suggested that I write a story about these two papers failing. And the usual assumption was they failed because they weren't as good as *The* Washington *Post*. Well, in fact, they were not as good as *The Washington Post*. *The Washington Post* had more serious stories—*The Washington Evening Star* had some very good reporters—but we had much more space and ambition and scale. What I also wrote in my analytical piece about their failure, I explained that, whatever they lacked in talent compared to the *Post*, they also were part of an inexorable process that I had spent many years studying and publishing about—once one paper gets ahead of another paper, the other papers are on the way to the cemetery, because the biggest expense of putting out a real newspaper is staff.

And they had at that time linotype machines. The copy had to be copy edited at a separate desk. Then it went out to the linotype operator, and that's a very expensive process. Once it's set in hard type and then put in and styled, running the presses is a relatively inexpensive part of the whole process. Once the presses start running, the smaller papers with the smaller circulation stopped their presses. But the one with the bigger one just continues printing. And each paper printed after that is printed at a pure profit, minus paper, which is about $300 a ton. This was the economics, the advantages of size. The management was very unhappy with that [way of looking at it] because they thought it diluted the issue of quality. And it didn't. I did say [that we] had better content, but part of it could be because they had this larger circulation which cost them very little money. And so they got a larger profit. They were very unhappy with that.

11-00:52:25
Rubens: "They" meaning—

11-00:52:27
Bagdikian: The management.

11-00:52:28
Rubens: Bradlee and Katharine Graham.

11-00:52:33
Bagdikian: Yes. And Katharine had just hired a firm in Memphis whose specialty was breaking unions. And *The Washington Post* had a union, a journalists union. They belonged to the newspaper guild and they had annual contracts that they bargained over on pay and benefits. But the management hired this group to break the union. The exact sequence in time I don't recall now but the reporters put in an equal opportunity lawsuit with EEOC, the government agency, saying that neither blacks nor whites were given an equal opportunity

for advancement and pay. In my piece I wrote that, yes, there was some basis for that. Bradlee and Katharine were enraged by that.

Bradlee and I went out to lunch. And he said, “My own lieutenant is writing about my being a strikebreaker and it’s not true.” He was very angry. I said, “It sounds as though you’re asking for my resignation.” He said, “Well, that’s up to you.” So it was toward the end of the day anyway. He left early. I wrote out a one-line, “I hereby resign from *The Washington Post*,” put it in a sealed envelope marked “Ben Bradlee, confidential” and left it on his desk. The next morning he came in and called me in. He said, “Pal, let’s forget about it. I got sort of hot about it.” And he said, “Forget it.”

And in the meantime, the man I had succeeded as national editor, who had preceded me as ombudsman, was back as national editor. He had the same problem with the staff that he had in the first place. Richard Harwood. He was a very good reporter but he didn’t like liberals. He didn’t like the fact that so many in the staff were liberal. He hated demonstrators against the war, the Vietnam War, and so forth. So we had a very hostile relationship. Bradlee liked him because he was a tough guy. Another friend of his, who was also a friend of mine, I asked, “What do you do to keep him from being so hostile?” He said, “You take him out in a parking lot and you have a fistfight and knock him down. After that, you’ll be okay.” I said, “I’m too old to do that kind of thing. You do that in grade school.” So I resigned. Bradlee came in and said, “Forget about it.” And then when the EEOC suit was brought by the black reporters—and I’ve forgotten the exact sequence—I said that they had some basis for that.

11-00:57:51
Rubens: But do you think that’s when you left?

11-00:57:57
Bagdikian: Yes. So, again, Bradlee was very angry. Katharine was very angry. I again handed in a letter of resignation and I left. As a result of that, I got a note that Katharine wanted to see me upstairs at her office. She said, “I’m sorry to see you go. I guess you and Ben Bradlee weren’t on the same wavelength.” I said, “Not on this issue.” She said, “Well, I’m sorry to see you go. Do you need any money?” I said, “No, I don’t need any money,” and I left. And I have never entered *The Washington Post* newsroom since.

11-00:58:57
Rubens: Let’s stop a moment to put in a new tape.

11-00:59:00
Bagdikian: Okay.

[End Audio File 11]

[Begin Audio File 12]

12-00:00:00
Rubens: So I'm just trying to get straight how many suits there were.

12-00:00:05
Bagdikian: Katharine had hired a firm whose purpose was to break not just strikes, but unions. And he brought instructions to every editor in the newsroom. The city editor, the national editor, the sports editor—every editor—saying, "Whenever the union steward on your staff makes the slightest error, comes in five minutes late, does anything whatever, go down there, yell at him, humiliate him in front of his own staff, then write a letter to his home saying he is a laggard. Say all the bad things. And write it to his home address so that his family sees it." And the union, of course, objected very angrily to that.

12-00:01:20
Rubens: You were management, of course, so you weren't a member of the union.

12-00:01:22
Bagdikian: No, I think I was ombudsman then. And I'm not sure whether I wrote about that or not. But the reporters were going to go on strike because it was such an insulting thing to do. I was personally and vocally against that. It was a terrible thing to do. And I've forgotten whether that was the break that—

12-00:02:10
Rubens: That led to your leaving.

12-00:02:12
Bagdikian: Both Bradlee and Katharine were very angry. And I said, "Well, I will resign," and I resigned.

12-00:02:25
Rubens: Now, later on, in Katharine's autobiography, she writes about this. She says something about you. Do you want to tell that story?

12-00:02:35
Bagdikian: Well, that's interesting. That hardback you're holding [Katharine Graham's memoir] is called the first edition, but it isn't the first printing. The first printing of that book she repeats the memorandum she wrote to Bradlee. "Why did we ever hire that asp Bagdikian?" And when that came out I just wrote her a two line letter saying, "I'm very sorry that you felt that and I think that you have insulted me and overlooked the fact that I devoted a great deal of time, energy, even time in prison, for the benefit of *The Washington Post*.". I remember that in the *Columbia Journalism Review,* Gloria Cooper wrote a column in which she condemned Graham for saying that.

12-00:04:12
Rubens: So the first edition has that statement.

12-00:04:15
Bagdikian: The first hardback that hit the market had the statement, “Why did we hire that asp?” Then what is now marked the first edition has that moderated somewhat. After Gloria Cooper wrote her column in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the statement disappeared in the paperback version of Katharine Graham’s book.

12-00:04:45
Rubens: Did you ever hear directly from Katharine or was her response simply the removal of that particular statement about why had they hired you?

12-00:05:02
Bagdikian: No, I never heard from her.

12-00:05:20
Rubens: Maybe she was afraid of a law suit.

124-00:06:43
Rubens: So you never saw Katharine Graham again or Ben Bradlee? That was the end of it?

124-00:06:51
Bagdikian: I never stepped into *The Washington Post* again. Now, once I was at some big social gathering or charity business in San Francisco, at someplace like the St. Francis Hotel. And he was there with Sally Quinn, whom he’d married. And Bradlee, typically, said, “Hi, pal. How you doing?” I said, “Okay, Ben.” But Sally was the ice maiden.

12-00:07:42
Rubens: So that was the only time you ran into him?

12-00:07:50
Bagdikian: Yes, I think so.

12-00:07:54
Rubens: Let’s talk about your book *The Effete Conspiracy*, which is published in 1973. This is a collection of essays that you had written in the past.

12-00:08:08
Bagdikian: I think I was still at the *Post* when that did come out.

12-00:08:12
Rubens: How did that book come about?

12-00:08:19
Bagdikian: That was my idea, but I had a very good agent and a very good publisher. Oh, it was a takeoff on Agnew’s famous attack on the press.

12-00:08:47
Rubens: Yes, he had attacked the press claiming they had a negative effect on the American psyche, something like: “There is a spirit of national masochism

encouraged by an effete corps of impotent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals." So "the effete corps" was the press. I saw a promotional piece for the book in *The Washington Post*.

12-00:09:03
Bagdikian: Yes. And so I put out this book, *The Effete Conspiracy*. I included in it a long story I had written on the relationship between the introduction of computers and union jobs. And that ultimately got me in trouble with Katharine Graham as well.

There was a journal put out by the American Association of Newspaper Editors, and it was a very serious magazine in Washington. There's a social-world magazine called *The Washingtonian* but then there was this more serious magazine, *The Washington Monthly*. It was like a local *Harper's* or *The Atlantic*. And they asked me to do a piece and I did. What happens when the big papers finally computerize? Small papers computerized early. The big metropolitans are much more complex. So they finally computerized and they had to decide what do they do about the typesetters union, which was the strongest union there was. I did a survey and there were two different responses by different newspapers. One response was simply to say, "You no longer have a job." And the other one, like the paper I used to work for in Providence, said: "You have social security and a pension and you can leave, but if there's a job you want at the paper and if you can do it, you can have it." So, for example, a couple of them became pretty good reporters. Linotype operators were frequently very literate. Others took other jobs, like delivering bundles of newspapers. And those who didn't get a new job got a pension. Not a big one, but they got one. And the papers of the country pretty much divided in that way. They either did it in a friendly way with their union or they said, "Tough luck. That's the end of you." And, of course, it was the end of the union because the linotype machines weren't being used anymore. That was their trade.

And I think that Katharine was quoted someplace as saying I was still making a cottage industry of attacking *The Washington Post*. I never, ever mentioned Katharine Graham except in praise. Ever. Literally true. It would be brought up when I lectured and I said, "She had the fate of the paper in her hand and she printed the Pentagon Papers and she put what she had on the line and I respect her for that." And I never, ever said anything negative about her. But she said I made a cottage industry of attacking her. That was pure fiction.

12-00:13:14
Rubens: I will try to find the Gloria Cooper citation for you next time we meet. I think we'll end for today. [Editor's note: The *Columbia Journalism Review* office was contacted and every Cooper column and article searched, but no reference was found to Bagdikian and Graham's book.]

[End Audio File 12

Interview #7: July 20, 2010
[Begin Audio File 13]

13-00:00:24
Rubens: Today is the 20th of July, and this time we're doing only an audio interview, not a video interview. And I had asked you, Ben, if you think you had any impact on changing the *Post* and particularly having longer stories on page one. Before you were hired by the *Post*, you had written an article for the *CJR* on what makes a newspaper great. And you said that the Washington *Post* was nearly great, but it had flaws. And I'd like you to reflect on if there are ways in which you felt you did make a difference in improving the *Post*, besides increasing circulation because of the Pentagon Papers.

13-00:01:12
Bagdikian: Well, it's very hard to turn a large metropolitan paper in a fast and visible way—it's like a great ocean liner. You don't want to cause dismay and disorganization of the staff by making drastic changes right away. You make change by the choice of stories, the requirements of what you expect a reporter to do on a story, so that when you present it to the executive editor, the stories, which the national staff always dominated, are what I would want for a complete and useful story for the public. That means a lot of changes in which kind of stories you accentuate, which reporters are best at certain kinds of stories, making that kind of match. So I did what I thought was the most useful. We were successful in making the *Post* more dominant and noticed, for one thing. When I came to the *Post,* there were two other newspapers in Washington that were in competition with it. There was another paper that was started by the Reverend Sun Moon that was separately financed. It was very influential when the Republicans were in the White House. But the Washington *Evening Star* and another tabloid were less powerful than the *Post* when I came; after I'd been there a year, they both folded. And I think they folded for a number of reasons. They didn't have the staff and the access that the *Post* had because of its reputation and the staff.

13-00:04:14
Rubens: You're speaking about both *The Daily News* and *The Evening Star*?

13-00:04:16
Bagdikian: Yes. And also, they had some good writers at *The Star* but they didn't have the cohesion of the staff. They tended to depend on a few individual reporters, and we had a much more coordinated kind of daily paper. Now, that is partly Ben Bradlee's doing. But since the national staff dominated the paper, I think we had some influence in making the *Post* the paper that people had to read in the Washington area. They had to take it. For example, the people in politics and in the Congress had to read the *Post* along with *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. But I don't think there was the same kind of need to read *The Star* and the second paper. So I think we made a difference that way.

Also, the morale on the staff was very, very good. I appreciated the sub-editors. There are about four sub-editors. There was a deputy managing editor, Peter Silberman. Silberman was very methodical, very quiet and thoughtful. He didn't make a lot of noise. But after a couple of weeks I chose him to be my deputy because he was that kind of systematic and perceptive person on how to deal with the discussions we had on the priorities of stories for most important, next most important and so forth. Also, when I became the managing editor of the national staff, it wasn't demoralization. My predecessor had caused some confusion and some dislikes. I think those got ironed out. Now, I had a problem. Two previous editors of the national staff wanted to continue to write stories and I told Bradlee that we can't have two staffs. Either we'll have one or you want to create a separate unit for them. But we have to have priority. That was a problem for a while.

13-00:07:39
Rubens: Do you remember their names?

13-00:07:40
Bagdikian: Yes. Dick Harwood was a good writer, but he was my predecessor and I think he was the cause of some demoralization on the staff. And the second one, Larry Stern, had been at the *Post* a very long time. I would give them separate assignments so we wouldn't have duplication and competition. And I did. And they got tired of doing that after a while, and they went off and did other things, which was a great relief to me.

13-00:08:41
Rubens: Meaning they left the paper or they covered other—

13-00:08:44
Bagdikian: No, they stopped acting as though they were reporters on the national staff. They became more independent and did not have things to do with the daily news. And that ceased to be a problem. I hired a couple of people in the editing part of the staff. Followed that very closely. So we did very well. And I think that that was appreciated by Bradlee. I let Silberman do most of the dealing with the conferences. We'd have a conference in the morning on what seemed to be coming up and then the news conference in the afternoon on what was going to be in the paper. And we'd consult that. And I'd always have Peter with me so he always knew what was going on. And there were a couple of women on the sub-editing staff who did better work. I backed up their coverage of the courts. And also the diplomatic coverage. We had four reporters covering diplomacy, the State Department plus foreign affairs in the Senate. This was always a matter of dividing it up and competition but each of the three people who covered State had different talents. I think I was successful in separating them out. One was very fast.

13-00:11:20
Rubens: You used him when you were writing up the stories about the Pentagon Papers.

13-00:11:27
Bagdikian: Yes. The other one was very slow but reliable and detailed and the other was good, too, for quick coverage of the second-level stories.

13-00:11:40
Rubens: You remember their two names?

13-00:11:43
Bagdikian: Chalmers Roberts and I'd have to look at the masthead to remember. Then the man who covered the Senate on important diplomatic stories would cover foreign affairs committee of the Senate. And he always objected when I would have the man who was covering it in the State Department follow a certain issue when it went to the Senate. And he complained bitterly. And I'd have to say, "You don't own the Senate. He's going to cover that issue. And if you can help him, help him. But otherwise, you do the usual Senate coverage." So that kind of sorting out of roles and function kept competition and dissension to a minimum. We'd begin the day about ten in the morning and the first edition would go to press very late in the afternoon. It'd go out to the outlying suburbs. And then the main edition would go out 9:30. And I would sit through the whole cycle for about two weeks so that I got a feel for it and made a few shifts around. And then I had a sense that it was functioning very well and that I could trust Peter Silberman to keep things orderly. He had a good memory for who did what and what was in a story and what wasn't. And at eleven o'clock every night, no matter where I was, I would call up and say, "What does the *Times* have that we don't have?" And they would do the same on their side—"What's the *Post* got?" So that went well.

13-00:14:08
Rubens: We talked about you being ombudsman, as well, and I was looking for a little bit more detail if you had remembered what that transition was like for you.

13-00:14:29
Bagdikian: The ombudsman would get all of the letters to the editor and complaints and so forth and make a daily report to the publisher what people are saying that disagreed with us or we said something wrong.

13-00:14:46
Rubens: Did you have a hand in selecting what letters would be published?

13-00:14:50
Bagdikian: No, that was handled by a separate editor. Then I would look at stories that needed to have holes filled in them and then writing for public consumption, how the paper functioned and how stories were developed and what decisions were made to put it in the paper and how much to emphasize it and handle complaints that a certain story was wrong. I'd go talk to the reporter who had done it. So that you became a kind of handyman fix-it.

13-00:15:48
Rubens: Did you miss the daily-ness of being the managing editor?

13-00:15:53
Bagdikian: Yes and no. It was a less exhausting and demanding a job. But it meant dealing with my former colleagues on the national staff very often. That would then put me in a position of conflict with my successor head of the national staff. Now, I'd always go to him first. I'd say, "I've had a complaint about this story and I'm going to talk to your reporter about this, okay?" That worked out. Then I would write periodic articles on the news as a whole, what was happening in the news business, what was happening in consequence of certain kinds of stories that exposed conditions and letting the public know what the impact of stories are and letting our own staff know what the public felt you were doing.

13-00:17:08
Rubens: So these are articles that were published in *The Washington Post*?

13-00:17:17
Bagdikian: Oh, yes. All on the *Post*. And I would do it periodically. Katharine and I differed on one that I wrote. When the other two papers went out of business, the feeling was they went out of business because they weren't as good a newspaper as the *Post*. And that was true. And I wrote about that. I said once they had fallen behind they were in a sense lost souls because the paper that has the largest circulation can produce its papers more cheaply than the competition and most of the expense of the *Post* is the presses. And once they had the paper all set and the presses running, when the other papers would stop, the *Post* would just continue and they could therefore produce papers at less cost per paper and that let them have stories that were not in the other papers.

13-00:18:34
Rubens: Oh, yes, we talked about this in another interview. Remind me about the difference in your analysis of that situation.

13-00:18:38
Bagdikian: Well, there was a feeling, almost everybody shared, was the reason why a paper made more money was it was a better paper. Well, there are a lot of pretty bad papers that made money because they're a monopoly. But when a good paper like the *Post* reached a certain point that was with a bigger circulation than its local competition, it, too, had a monopoly on the extra papers that the other papers couldn't print because they didn't have the customers. It was a combination of being a better paper with more customers in an economy of mass production which gave them more money and profits and reinvestment, if they cared to, into the quality of the paper.

13-00:19:41
Rubens: So did Katharine have an objection to that second point? What was her—

13-00:19:45
Bagdikian: Well, I think she didn't altogether buy that theory. She just thought that it was better quality and that was partly true.

13-00:21:43
Rubens: So we discussed last week your lunch with Ben Bradlee and the conversation with Katharine Graham and how your tenure there came to an end. That must have been a very difficult period for you.

13-00:21:59
Bagdikian: It was.

13-00:22:01
Rubens: When you look back on it, do you see any place where you wish you had acted differently or are you glad about the outcome?

13-00:22:12
Bagdikian: Well, I don't think there was any alternative for me.

13-00:25:04
Rubens: We haven't talked about you working with the Mellett Fund for a Free and Responsible Press. That was from 1966 to 1970.

13-00:25:46
Bagdikian: Yes. Lowell Mellett came from a well-to-do family and was concerned with the quality of paper, and he left the union a bequest to do something that would contribute to improving the quality of the American press.

13-00:26:16
Rubens: Which union?

13-00:26:19
Bagdikian: I think it was the reporter's union. Well, they began using that for internal expenses, for trips, and one of the members objected to their misuse of that funding, and they asked me would I become the head of the Mellett Fund and change things. So I said yes, on one condition, that I can do what I want with it. We ended up using the fund to establish standards for good reporting, highlighting good examples and rewarding them.

13-00:27:34
Rubens: So you served in this capacity for four years?

13-00:27:37
Bagdikian: Yes.

13-00:27:38
Rubens: During some of the time that you were at the RAND?

13-00:27:43
Bagdikian: No. When I went to RAND I dropped all those functions, because I had a rather large task ahead of me.

13-00:27:58
Rubens: Where were they based, the Mellett Fund?

13-00:28:002
Bagdikian: It was in Washington. I think its mission has changed, and now maybe they choose a well-written story every year or something to win the Mellett Prize.

13-00:28:43
Rubens: Now, the other appointment we didn't discuss was your service on a screening panel for the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1967 to 1970. How did that appointment come about?

13-00:29:03
Bagdikian: I was asked by someone in the Lyndon Johnson administration if I would be on that committee. Because I had been on a larger committee put together by a friend of mine, a former newsperson, who had a large organization on establishing standards for good news. And that was enough of a reputation so that the Endowment asked me if I would—the Endowment had two levels. One at which applications came in, and the ones that seemed more fundamental and important would be winnowed out and then the best would go to another level, where a group of experts would choose which ones would get some money. I was at that second level. I would take all of those applications home and read through them very carefully.

13-00:30:25
Rubens: These were applications that didn't have just to do with the news? Or did they focus primarily on newspaper grants?

13-00:30:32
Bagdikian: Well, they were all kinds of things in the humanities. There was one for music, there was one for painting. I remember there was a man who had invented a machine with which, by the use of the hands around electrodes, you could make music, called the Theremin. I told my fellow members, "I'd like to back that up just to see what happens." Because he had a recording he sent us and it sounded interesting—I thought he could make sounds that maybe would be useful for use in the classroom or maybe even a member of the orchestra. So I said, "Let's support him." It was one of those things you take a chance on that's very odd. Otherwise you looked at very serious programs and I was very careful. I'd go home and study those things. We'd have discussions and we would decide which ones should be supported. Usually they were people in academia. So I learned a lot, because someone would have a very interesting proposal about trends in population and certain levels of a society. I would read all of those carefully and learn a great deal and apply what I knew about my experience on covering the courts and living with the poor so that I would allot funds on the basis of how interesting and serious and plausible these proposals were. It was a very interesting job and I enjoyed it very much.

13-00:33:00
Rubens: So you would meet as a panel with other judges, what, two times a year?

13-00:33:06
Bagdikian: Yes, I think it was that.

13-00:33:10
Rubens: And, again, once you went out to California to RAND, then you resigned from that?

13-00:33:17
Bagdikian: Yes. I left Washington so it wasn't practical.

13-00:33:18
Rubens: We didn't talk about being appointed a trustee to Clark University in 1967. You served for nine years. Do you want to comment on that?

13-00:33:33
Bagdikian: Of course I had gone to Clark and I knew the college quite well. It was small but it had some distinguished people. Johns Hopkins and Clark, in the nineteenth century, were the only academic institutions that did nothing but research. They didn't have an education function for undergraduates. And poor Mr. Clark, who had made his fortune selling groceries and stuff to Forty-niners going to California during the Gold Rush—he wanted a college, a university for sons of working-class men. G. Stanley Hall was at Clark—he was one of the leading child psychologists at the time on psychology at a very high level. It's the only institution in the United States Freud ever visited.

13-00:35:24
Rubens: How were you tapped to join the governing board?

13-00:25:26
Bagdikian: I became a member of the board of directors. They had previously selected a president who had very bad relations with the faculty. And I had moved in Washington. Then the chairman of the board, a woman who became a very close and dear friend, asked me would I come back and do a survey of the faculty about the president they're having trouble with. The first thing I did was I interviewed the president about what he thought the problems were. And then I talked on a confidential basis to all the members of the faculty and had to report that, yes, he had not been very wise in his policies and he had offended needlessly, and curtailed the work of some important faculty members, and that it was probably justified that he should leave. And he did. And there had to then be a selection of a new president. And at that time the head of the board was a woman, Alice Higgins, who became a very close friend. Her husband had established the worldwide Nicholson File Company. Later on she asked me to edit a book she wrote.

And she asked me then to join the board and she and I cooperated in recommendations about department and faculty needs and of course in raising money.

13-00:37:46
Rubens: This board was quite active, then.

13-00:37:51
Bagdikian: We wouldn't choose faculty members. We might say a certain department needed a new chair and we would consult with members of the department and then there would be a search for people in the field who seemed to be both highly regarded and also imaginative and progressive. And we would bring them. We did a great deal of that. And the university grew by leaps and bounds.

13-00:38:51
Rubens: I guess you gave up that position when you moved permanently to California?

13-00:38:57
Bagdikian: Yes.

13-00:39:00
Rubens: Was she chair of the board of directors this whole time?

13-00:39:03
Bagdikian: She was the chair for a very long time. And at Clark University now there is a very large building which is the Higgins Institute for the Fine Arts. I'm not sure. But they were a very prominent family in Worcester. They owned an international company in the abrasive business, which made files and so forth.

13-00:39:45
Rubens: So how often would you go to board meetings?

13-00:39:50
Bagdikian: I would either drive from Washington or fly. And there was another board member who was the secretary of the Massachusetts Historical Society. He was very learned. And the Massachusetts Historical Society of Boston was one of the very authoritative high-status institutions in Massachusetts.

13-00:40:41
Rubens: You were asked to give a talk there. I read a copy of it, and I remember you had a phrase in it regarding these are "insidious times," I think was your phrase. You were referring to the Nixon Administration and the assault on the press and on liberal values.

13-00:41:07
Bagdikian: Yes. Well, I guess I would have talked about that but it wouldn't have been in relation to what the press really needed to be criticized for—not just the political positions. In any case, I would fly to Boston. He lived in Boston so we would be meeting in Worcester, which is fifty miles away from Boston. He would drive me to the airport. We would have lots of time to talk to each other. He was a wonderful source of information. Usually the board members were Boston Brahmins. But he was an Irishman who just was very literate. We would stop and have a McDonald's hamburger before we'd go back to Boston, and I'd fly back to Washington.

13-00:42:25
Rubens: Are there any other people on that board that you would like to mention, or any other issues regarding the college?

13-00:42:45
Bagdikian: Alice Higgins asked me to do the introduction to her book. She and her husband were really very close friends. Marlene and I would meet her and her husband someplace for dinner in Boston. I remember once when we both had begun to have hearing problems. The first hearing aids were in the ones in your ear that you couldn't see—you had a pocket regulator. You could adjust it for a quiet atmosphere, or a noisy atmosphere, or to suppress background noise as in a restaurant. When we had dinner together, I took out mine and showed them this magic machine. [Alice] said, "Isn't that interesting." She opened up her pocket book, she took out the same thing. We were very much together. She was a very public-spirited building person. Besides creating this large department at Clark, she would organize every Sunday her whole family to go down about two miles on their road picking up trash and cleaning up. During the war, they started to have a big chicken coop so they would have their own eggs, even though they are a very rich family. They were also Unitarians.

13-00:44:54
Rubens: So you had that in common.

13-00:44:56
Bagdikian: Yes. And that was a very significant relationship and very rewarding one. I've been very lucky that way.

13-00:45:08
Rubens: So are there any other things about Clark that you'd like to mention?

13-00:47:36
Bagdikian: I received an honorary degree from Clark, which I valued, and had a very interesting incident. When I was getting my honorary degree—

13-00:48:27
Rubens: That's in 1963.

13-00:48:30
Bagdikian: You have your cowl on and so forth. And also getting an honorary degree was a judge. His wife sat next to my son Eric and it started to rain. So the audience had to go to the president's home. And when Eric took off his jacket there was a kind of label on the back with the name of this same Boston judge's son. And the judge said, "Where in the world did you get that jacket?" Well, it turns out that a neighbor in Washington had a child who'd received this jacket as a hand-me-down from the judge's family when they lived in Boston. And then they passed it on to my son in Washington. Funny thing.

It was a very fruitful time, except that my marriage had become more difficult. My wife had a serious illness.

13-00:50:21
Rubens: You're referring now to your first wife?

13-00:50:22
Bagdikian: Yes, I'm talking about Betty Bagdikian. Her maiden name was Ogasapian. And we'd been married since World War II. And she had a very bad case of hepatitis and almost died but she recovered. But things were never the same after that period of time.

13-00:51:05
Rubens: You were separated by 1971.

13-00:51:08
Bagdikian: Yes. And my son Chris already was working on a small press up in Half Moon Bay in California. And my youngest son Eric was still in college and he said he wanted to live with me. So I rented an apartment in Washington and we lived together. And it was during that period that I got to know Betty Medsger, who also was a religion editor at *The Washington Post*. After my divorce from my first wife, Betty Medsger and I were married.

13-00:52:00
Rubens: When was that? Was that after you had left the *Post* or were you still at the *Post*?

13-00:52:08
Bagdikian: No, it was toward the end of the time that I was at the *Post.*

13-00:52:14
Rubens: Okay. While you were ombudsman.

13-00:52:16
Bagdikian: Yes. I had done research on a book and all the research was done but I need to write it up. I'd always loved the Bay Area and thought that would be a good place to write. I'd gone to a party, a going-away party for Ed Markey, who is in the news now again, and we were very good friends. Also the former Senator of Wisconsin, Senator Gaylord Nelson, was there. And when he heard that I was going to move to Berkeley, "Oh, you have to see my former administrative assistant, Ed Bayley, who's the dean of the school of journalism." I said, "Well, I'm not going there to teach. I'm going there to write a book." He said, "Well, I'm going to let Ed know you're moving out." So I came out and bought a house up in the hills in Berkeley, which was wonderful, and Ed Bayley said, "Well—"

13-00:53:52
Rubens: You looked him up here in Berkeley?

13-00:53:54
Bagdikian: Yes. Well, Gaylord Nelson had let Ed Bayley know that I was coming. Ed Bayley said, "Well, are you going to teach?" I said, "No, I'm writing a book." He said, "Well, Gaylord says you ought to be on the faculty. We have a

lecture course in the summer. Why don't you teach that course?" And so I taught that course to 300 students in the summer. These are the people who either had attended the summer session or were from other universities making up their course credits.

13-00:54:48
Rubens: What was the subject of the course?

13-00:54:52
Bagdikian: Mass media in America. And so at the end of that time Ed said, "Well, would you like to join the faculty?" And I said, "I think so. Yes. But I have a book to write." And I remember something Daniel Bell, the sociologist had said about becoming an academic. Daniel Bell used to be the head of *Fortune* magazine and was Luce's golden boy. Daniel Bell suddenly left Luce, giving up the potential to head the Luce empire, to accept a professorship at Columbia. And he went to dinner with Luce and Luce asked, "Dan, what can Columbia offer you that I can't?" Dan said, "Three things. June, July and August." That's what was attractive about becoming an academic: June, July and August you had off, and you got paid during that time, and it was amazing.

13-00:56:11
Rubens: Oh, an hour has gone so quickly. Let me change the tape.

[End Audio File 13]

[Begin Audio File 14]

14-00:00:00
Rubens: This is tape two of July 20th. Before we start to talk about your new life in California and at UC Berkeley, I want to pursue a question I asked you earlier, if you had any specific memory or observations about the Watergate Hearings. You wrote a wonderful piece for the *CJR* in November of 1973 where you said, "Newspapers are learning too slowly to adapt to TV." And you said that you did a survey of newspapers. You said that Watergate was probably the most important thing that had happened to non-commercial public affairs reporting since it began. And you talked about the fact that the newspapers didn't have the commentary and the interpretation of Watergate. They pretty much just published reporting on what was said, whereas TV had captivated the public. The ratings noted that audiences for the hearings surpassed those for the daily soap operas.

14-00:02:41
Bagdikian: Yes. It must have been before Bernstein and Woodward.

14-00:02:46
Rubens: It was the Sam Ervin hearings. And you looked at a particular day. Let me see if I remember this. You looked at the Nielson ratings the week of July 9th to the 13th in '73. That was the week that John Mitchell testified. It was just an

extraordinary coup for television. It's a wonderful piece that you wrote. Do you have any other particular memories of Watergate?

14-00:03:26
Bagdikian: Well, I remember Watergate very well. I don't remember all the details about any contact I had or commentary about it, except that what it turned out to be, of course, was a conspiracy with Haldeman. Nixon has always fascinated me because he was extremely intellectually bright but had a streak of paranoia. Always thought people didn't like him, and they didn't.

14-00:04:10
Rubens: Did you ever meet him?

14-00:04:13
Bagdikian: Yes. There were press conferences and I may have interviewed him on a special item at one time. And then every Christmas the White House invites the press corps in for a Christmas party and I would have met him then.

14-00:05:44
Rubens: Tell me about how you came to do the newspaper survival study for the Markle Foundation. That was after *The Effete Conspiracy* came out.

14-00:05:59
Bagdikian: Well, foundations were giving grants for studies of how to improve the news or what the status of the news was. This was during a period, of course, of the growth of television. So they just made a large grant. What they do is look around on an issue they're interested in and see someone who may do it. They say, "We would like to give you a grant of X amount and have you work on that issue." And so I put out a small booklet called *Death in the Afternoon*. Things were changing—there was a time when people went to work in their offices and factories downtown, and took the trolley down, took the morning paper, and then when they got out of work they picked up the paper in the evening to read on the trolley back. When suburbia developed, people didn't take the trolleys downtown to work anymore. They drove out there and they drove back home. So the afternoon papers died. That was the beginning of local news on television, which wasn't very good.

14-00:07:52
Rubens: Or in-depth.

14-00:07:54
Bagdikian: Right. Before Cronkite, there were the two men—

14-00:08:07
Rubens: Oh, of course. Chet Huntley and David Brinkley.

14-00:08:25
Bagdikian: Yes. And even with Cronkite, who was very good, we were the only major democracy that had only half an hour of national TV news, of serious national

news. Every other developed democracy had at least an hour or hours during the day.

14-00:08:47
Rubens: So this was a three-year study that you worked on. You were also writing for the *Columbia Journalism Review*. But was it a pretty major grant that you got?

14-00:09:02
Bagdikian: Well, I did a lot of research but I wish I had written a different—because what I did was visit newspapers around the country that either had died, and I talked to the former owners and editors, or that were struggling. I went to Pecos, Texas, where it was so windy you had to go from lamp post to lamp post to not be knocked down. And these old editors would talk about what it was like in the olden days. And I'd talk to them. They were struggling to stay alive in the face of television. And also the chains. Gannett, Newhouse and others were buying up papers, including some very distinguished papers, and turning them into more superficial and more standardized papers among their whole chain so that Gannett news would be a rewrite of the Associated Press and it would be in all of their papers, with a minimum of local news because, for local news, you had to have reporters, and reporters had to be paid. That's all they did. And then even in broadcasting, there used to be local broadcasting of daily news, local news.

And I remember being on one that was on ABC and it was a morning interview. And he said before we started, "Now, don't mention the weather, don't mention the time of day, don't mention the city, because this is going to be played in eleven other stations around the country," and broadcasters will say, "Here is the daily Oklahoma City news," or wherever it might be, and then they would have the standard news that everybody else got, with a different introduction. Radio had an audience of people driving home from work. After a while, that shriveled, because drivers were most interested in news about traffic—because what people did was listening to where the traffic jams were. Traffic reporting became very important.

14-00:12:09
Rubens: So you traveled extensively throughout the country for this study?

14-00:12:13
Bagdikian: Yes. The ones that had the best quality news survived better but they didn't make as much money as the ones that had standard news for all of their papers and a minimum of local reporting. And it was sometimes very painful. I remember interviewing a man in Salem, Oregon, who sold his paper to Gannett on a promise by Gannett that they would maintain the State House coverage. Very few states have State House coverage, as a matter of fact. They don't cover their legislature. And they would maintain all the other coverage. The minute it changed ownership, they stopped that. I remember having lunch with him up in Salem and at the nearby table sat the new owners,

and they could hear him complaining about what they'd done. And they were snickering over there. They pulled a fast one on this guy.

14-00:13:38
Rubens: So it took you three years. Probably a couple of years to do the research for the newspaper survival study?

14-00:13:46
Bagdikian: Well, that was hard to measure because I was doing other things at the same time. But it would have been over a period of two or three years.

14-00:14:02
Rubens: And how big was the report? You said it was a pamphlet?

14-00:14:04
Bagdikian: It was a pamphlet. We advertised it. I used some of the money for ads taken out in places like *The Nation* and *The Progressive* and *Editor and Publisher.*

14-00:14:28
Rubens: You must have sent it to journalism schools, as well.

14-00:14:31
Bagdikian: Yes, yes. The ones that I knew were serious. A lot of journalism schools were pretty bad. They were often just a course in the freshman year but there were others that were serious.

14-00:14:48
Rubens: And so do you remember any specifics? I haven't found *Death in the Afternoon*. Do you remember a response to it?

14-00:15:02
Bagdikian: I'll look and see. I saved all the stuff I've ever written.

14-00:15:23
Rubens: Okay. So I think the last topic that we'll talk about today is how your book, *Caged,* came about. Because you've already done the research for it when you move out to California. And one of the reasons you move to California is because you want to write up the book here.

14-00:15:53
Bagdikian: I had picked eight prisoners whom I got to know at considerable depth. Each of them, I went right back from the time they were born, if I could find out. I'd go to county registers to look for their birth certificates to see where the parents were. I'd see all the parents who were findable by looking in directories or relatives, people would tell me about these prisoners and reconstruct their lives, and I reviewed the transcripts of their criminal trials.

14-00:16:43
Rubens: Now, these were all people who had been involved in a strike at a specific penitentiary.

14-00:16:50
Bagdikian: Yes, at Lewisburg Penitentiary in Pennsylvania. It was built in 1932 when "reform" meant building big prisons with stylish exteriors. In this case, the design was with very narrow windows and [little] natural light reached the interior.

14-00:16:55
Rubens: How did the idea come to you that you were going to interview these eight people? You actually interviewed more.

14-00:17:01
Bagdikian: Well, I thought that it would be a way of showing in-depth what the lives of these people had been. Of course, overwhelmingly what it showed was that in very early childhood, they either had no guidance or they kept being told by their parents they're going to go to prison someday, "You're going to go to prison someday if you don't behave." One of them was a descendant of Horatio Alger and he was a hopeless case. So it was reconstructing them and that was an interesting process.

14-00:17:50
Rubens: You had an advance from Harper & Row to do this work?

14-00:17:56
Bagdikian: Yes. The week it was published they went out of business. They were bought by somebody else. A couple of businessmen. And they said, "You can have all the books of these you want because we can't distribute them anymore."

14-00:18:21
Rubens: This is published in 1976. Are there any stories that you remember specifically about doing your investigation that you want to mention?

14-00:18:40
Bagdikian: Well, I was in a lot of prisons and I was in touch with a lot of psychologists, psychiatrists, to try to reconstruct their lives. People that they grew up with. A lot of foster homes. It was overwhelmingly true that, in the early years, they were almost condemned to have a life that would be fragmented.

14-00:19:24
Rubens: I didn't bring the reviews of *Caged* but it had a good reception.

14-00:19:46
Bagdikian: And I think it kind of disappeared because the publisher had no push. Publisher had gone out of business.

14-00:19:53
Rubens: And then, in the meantime, you've started teaching at Berkeley. 1976. What was that like teaching 300 students? Were you comfortable?

14-00:20:06
Bagdikian: Well, that was just the first course I taught. That was a lecture course. Very tough because everybody regarded journalism and the news as a gut course.

But after the first year I no longer did that. I had a seminar, a small class of about six or ten people. I had been invited to give lectures at many colleges and universities over the years, so lecturing was not hard.

14-00:20:45
Rubens: You had a general reporting class?

14-00:20:49
Bagdikian: I taught the opening course for my first couple of years. The graduate school offered a first-year reporting class. And then I had a smaller class that concentrated on in-depth reporting and then I had a seminar on ethics which I created.

14-00:21:03
Rubens: How did you structure that class?

14-00:21:06
Bagdikian: That one was the one most interesting. I would give them a real case in ethics and say, "Write a paper overnight and we'll talk about it the next time." And they would argue with each other about it all that time. And whenever they asked me what I would do I said, "I will tell you at the end of the course." And at the end of the course they gave me a party. I still am in touch with members of some of my best classes. One of them is a Vietnamese woman who came from a Vietnamese family who was a reporter for a while on the San Jose paper.

14-00:22:08
Rubens: *The Mercury News*?

14-00:22:10
Bagdikian: Yes. Tran Nhu. And Nhu is now back in Vietnam. At the moment, she's trying to write a book. But we were in touch on the telephone, back and forth. Same thing with some of the others. There was one class where everybody clicked. We did. And they'd come and show me pictures of their children. Danny Gold became a front page editor for *The New York Times*. He'd figure out where the page one stories would fit together. I just wrote him a little while ago. When he was doing a thesis, he said, "There's a whole stretch of land from Hearst Street down to Sacramento and they're going to build a bunch of apartment houses there and there's a small playground and the kids—" I said, "Go do a story about it." So he did a complete story and it got into the papers. It got to city hall. It is now a heavily used public park from Hearst down to Sacramento.

14-00:23:48
Rubens: Oh, the Hearst Strip.

14-00:23:50
Bagdikian: And I wrote to him just a couple of weeks ago and I said, "I just want to let you know, Dan, that the Daniel Gold playground is still in full use." But the

city didn't call it that as they should have. But it was his idea and city hall adopted it.

14-00:24:14
Rubens: So once you moved back to California in '76 and started teaching, how many newspapers did you read a day?

14-00:24:25
Bagdikian: Well, I read *The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times*. It was hard to get *The Washington Post*. They don't have a West Coast edition. I read the L.A. *Times,* the *Chronicle*. *The Examiner* still had a morning edition and afternoon edition. And there was a Berkeley paper that came in and out. It was really a company that owned a bunch of small suburban papers where the content was silly.

14-00:25:05
Rubens: *The Berkeley Gazette*.

14-00:25:09
Bagdikian: Yes. It was *The Berkeley Gazette*, it was *The Richmond Gazette*. It was all the same paper with a lot of trivia in it. Until the start of *The Daily Planet* and that has real local news in it.

14-00:25:30
Rubens: When do you start working on media monopoly? Because you can see in so many of your articles for the *CJR* and so many of your talks, you can see the beginnings of media monopoly. *Death in the Afternoon* is probably something that contributed to it.

14-00:25:57
Bagdikian: Well, there were seven editions.

14-00:26:00
Rubens: Yes. So the first one comes out in 1983.

14-00:26:03
Bagdikian: Yes and the last one came out as *The New Media Monopoly*.

14-00:26:05
Rubens: And so you must have started it somewhere in the early 1980s.

14-00:26:10
Bagdikian: Yes. We spent about three years working on it. It came out and immediately sold quite a bit. Then there was a second edition, third edition, fourth edition. There's seven editions. The last edition, the seventh, *The New Media Monopoly*.

14-00:26:28
Rubens: 2004, I think. Yes. Do you remember how the idea came about? How did you get the idea to do it? This was Beacon Press, your old standby.

14-00:26:44
Bagdikian: Well, I love Beacon Press because of its Unitarian background?

Rubens: Do you remember the germination of the idea?

14-00:27:23
Bagdikian: I sent it to fourteen publishers and they turned it down. And after it was published by Beacon, it sold out right away. And then edition after edition after edition.

14-00:27:38
Rubens: How long did it take you to write out the proposal? Do you have a story about how the idea to write *Media Monopoly* came about?

14-00:27:50
Bagdikian: Well, I just saw the best papers being bought up by the chains and then getting cheaper and cheaper in content—less and less news and more ads. They began being corrupt, having stories that would back up advertising. And there was a national scandal when the man who took over *The L.A. Times* told Staples, "Why don't we be partners in putting out a Staples edition in the Sunday *Times* and we'll split the profits?" That was Mr. Willis. And that was a big scandal. And then Otis Chandler, with whom I'd become quite friendly when I was living on the West Coast, he'd maintained a block of stock and when it combined with *The Chicago Tribune* he sold his stock and gave up. And that was another case where we did a lot of talking together.

14-00:29:48
Rubens: So you told me about meeting him a few times when you were out at RAND. When you came here to Berkeley, would you still see him?

14-00:29:59
Bagdikian: I would be in touch with him, yes. But then when it got bought by the *Tribune*, he just sold his share and went back to being a big game hunter.

14-00:30:33
Rubens: Let me ask you about the Newspaper Preservation Act of 1970. How is it that you came to testify against it?

14-00:30:50
Bagdikian: My fear was that it would put the government in the position of having influence on the fate of papers.

14-00:31:32
Rubens: It was basically a Nixon Administration push to allow an agreement to be made that only one newspaper would be published in the city. It facilitated monopoly. It was one of the signature pieces that allowed for a monopoly.

14-00:31:51
Bagdikian: Well, I don't remember the details now. I'd have to look through it to recall exactly how that issue came out.

14-00:32:08
Rubens: Okay. So we'll talk about it next time.

[End Audio File 14]

Interview #8: July 27, 2010
[Begin Audio File 15]

15-00:00:28
Rubens: This is the 27th of July and I'm talking to Ben Bagdikian. Tell me about your relationship with Robert Maynard at the *Post*. He was one of nine African Americans who were there.

15-00:00:43
Bagdikian: He was the only black who was on the national staff. There was nothing particular except that he was always very fashionably dressed and he was rather casual about sometimes coming in. He was always charming, wearing the latest in men's fashion. But there was nothing in particular. We had, at that time, perfectly good relations. He did general reporting, nothing specialized. So that was about as much for Robert Maynard. Now, later he went on in ways that had nothing to do with the *Post*.

15-00:01:53
Rubens: Well, let me stick with his role at the *Post* for a minute. You write a story for the *Post*, when you're ombudsman, and the lead is "*The Washington Post* and blacks on its news staff." You make a case that Bradlee had hired more African Americans as reporters than were employed at any other newspaper, and yet, still, the representation of African Americans in managerial positions, for instance, wasn't adequate. Now, Maynard writes a response and he seems not to understand what your point is. He thinks that you are saying it's difficult to find African Americans that are competent, but that wasn't the point you were making. Do you remember that exchange between you and Maynard?

15-00:02:49
Bagdikian: I may have at some point as ombudsman said that no American newspaper had a representation of blacks on their staff that was anything close to their position in American society, including *The Washington Post*, although the *Post* had a few blacks. They were—

15-00:03:14
Rubens: They had more than any other newspaper.

15-00:03:16
Bagdikian: But they and other papers should have more.

15-00:03:19
Rubens: And so you don't remember that exchange specifically between Maynard and you?

15-00:03:26
Bagdikian: I don't think that was any major conflict with Bob at the *Post*. At that time, our relations were good and routine.

15-00:03:33
Rubens: Okay. Did you know him when you came out to California and he ended up buying *The Oakland Tribune*?

15-00:03:37
Bagdikian: Yes, I knew him. Then he became very close to Allen Neuharth, who owned the Gannett chain. They had a number of mutual activities and Gannett helped Bob and his wife to establish an office which had space in the journalism building at UC. But it was unconnected to the Berkeley journalism program.

15-00:04:22
Rubens: And then he went on to buy *The Oakland Tribune*? He was one of the few African Americans in the country who owned a newspaper. As I recall, the ownership of *The Oakland Tribune* was not a conventional financial acquisition. Neuharth's interest was to use that as a way to experiment with what was to become *USA Today*.

15-00:04:30
Bagdikian: He was, in a sense, almost given it by Gannett as a kind of partnership. And Gannett used a brief edition of *The Oakland Tribune*, printed in peach paper, as a part of his planning for *USA Today*. And so it became a kind of experiment or prototype for that. But otherwise, it was a regular newspaper. Not a bad one. I think under Maynard, *The Oakland Tribune* was greatly improved.

15-00:05:19
Rubens: But you didn't have any dealings with Maynard at the time?

15-00:05:22
Bagdikian: Occasionally we had mutual friends and we'd see each other in passing, but not a very continuous and deep relationship at that time.

15-00:05:37
Rubens: I'd like to follow-up on the Neuharth office at the J School.

15-00:06:10
Bagdikian: In North Gate Hall, there was a kind of basement floor in which space was given to the Maynard Project, which was unconnected to the journalism school. It was not a project in the journalism school itself. It was a relationship to help them along.

15-00:06:41
Rubens: How long were they there?

15-00:06:45
Bagdikian: Not long. They were there until Maynard moved back to *The Oakland Tribune*. And then he was the editor and publisher for a while of *The Oakland Tribune* during Gannett's preparation and trial to create *USA Today*.

15-00:07:06
Rubens: Another thing that we did not talk about during your tenure at the *Post* that I think is important, is that as a result of your series *Shame of the Prisons*, you actually testified and were a part of a suit to get prisoners to have the right to give personal interviews in a federal prison.

15-00:07:44
Bagdikian: Yes. That's true. I don't have any memories of the details.

15-00:07:58
Rubens: Okay. I think your role was important and I wanted to pay some attention to it.

Let me give you a list of reporters who were with the *Post* during your time there and see if you have some comments to make about your working relationship.

15-00:08:33
Bagdikian: Some I don't remember at all. Marilyn Berger was on for staff for a while. Roy Aarons I made head of our Los Angeles bureau. John Field I don't recognize at all. William Greider was the best writer on the national staff and ultimately, after I left, he became the assistant managing editor, the job that I had before being ombudsman. Sanford Ungar was on the *Post* and later went on to become the dean of American University's School of Journalism.

15-00:10:28
Rubens: There is an announcement in *The Washington Post* that Maynard is to replace you as ombudsman, September 1972 . That you had resigned and that he was going to be your replacement.

15-00:10:39
Bagdikian: Well, that could be.

15-00:10:41
Rubens: I couldn't find an announcement of your hiring as ombudsman. I did find articles that you wrote for the *Post* shortly before you leave and they have a by-line that identifies you as a staff writer for *The Washington Post*. I guess when they published your articles, they weren't going to call you ombudsman. They were going to list you as a national staff writer.

One of your articles is about the changing standards of the media's treatment of gender. Not only were you an advocate for African Americans, you were an advocate for a certain kind of portrayal of women and the hiring of women in the media. This is an article that you write in April '72. You're talking about a conversation amongst editors on the subject of sexism in the media, and that "the treatment of women in the news is a subject of turbulence in every newspaper and magazine that has a discernable sign of life." It's not something that's foremost in your memory?

15-00:13:03
Bagdikian: No, there are many articles I wrote on the subject of race and gender.

15-00:13:46
Rubens: You did do a lot of speaking on issues of representation in the media. Here's an article about the National Press Club that met in Washington. How important was the National Press Club?

15-00:14:03
Bagdikian: It was quite important in the sense that when there were visiting dignitaries at a high level visiting Washington they frequently gave an address to the Washington Press Club. The Washington Press Club had a very large assembly hall in addition to offices of individual newspapers. I think it was a six or eight story building. And it had a very large hall where big speeches were made. And during that period women were not permitted in the Press Club. But when there were big speeches by visiting dignitaries, women reporters had to sit in the balcony like Orthodox synagogues. They couldn't sit on the main floor.

15-00:15:04
Rubens: So that's an example of you paying attention to the unrepresented. I think women were first admitted in 1971. [interruption] I noticed also that even though you leave *The Washington Post* and we discussed that it wasn't the most pleasant of separations, but they ran reviews of your book, *Caged*. So you weren't shunned. After you resigned there were several reviews of books. In '74 and then '76 there was a review of a book on A. J. Liebling and several others that you continued—

15-00:17:30
Bagdikian: It could be that I wrote the reviews for some other publication that got on the Associated Press or something like that, and the *Post* picked them up, or it could have been for the *Post.* I don't recall. But I had no direct relationship with *The Washington Post* afterward.

15-00:18:12
Rubens: I want to clarify how you first met Edwin Bayley, the dean of the journalism school at Berkeley.

15-00:18:31
Bagdikian: I knew about Edwin Bayley, and he about me, because we worked for two of the very few papers who assigned people to cover Senator McCarthy very carefully and fully. He covered McCarthy and so did I, for *The Milwaukee Journal* and *The Providence Journal.* We went to the hearings and we reported what the hearings were about and we described McCarthy and his behavior. So when I knew that when I was going to come to Berkeley, I went to a Washington going-away party, and Senator Gaylord Nelson also was a guest, and he said, "You've got to see Edwin Bayley who used to work for me in Milwaukee." Bayley was the head of the School of Journalism in Berkeley but at that moment he was writing the book about McCarthy and had to do some research at *The New York Times*. He happened to be there temporarily for a few weeks. And so I went to New York to see him.

15-00:19:44
Rubens: And that was Gaylord Nelson who told you to look him up?

15-00:19:51
Bagdikian: Yes.

15-00:19:52
Rubens: He was a senator from Wisconsin –noted for his opposition to Gerald Ford's nomination as vice-president in l973. How did you know him?

15-00:20:26
Bagdikian: I used to interview him. He was a leader among a liberal block in the Senate and had been a very influential politician. So we had a friendly relationship. And I met him when I was at a party and he learned I was moving to Berkeley. That's when he said, "You got to see Ed Bayley."

15-00:20:53
Rubens: Okay. You also knew Ed Markey pretty well.

15-00:21:00
Bagdikian: Ed Markey was a representative from Massachusetts. And he and I worked together a lot on freedom of press issues. I testified before his committee and also on the Newspaper Preservation Act. So we had a lot to do with each other and we were very good friends.

15-00:21:23
Rubens: Yes. Now, we didn't discuss your testimony before the committee. And you were against the Newspaper Preservation Act. There's a wonderful picture of you testifying before the committee.

15-00:21:35
Bagdikian: Yes. Originally I was against that because I thought it would be used by newspapers to get the government to make up for whatever losses they had. But it did pass. But I became very active and friendly with all the groups in the Congress who were working for betterment of news coverage.

15-00:22:34
Rubens: And it's also the period of the consolidation of the—

15-00:22:37
Bagdikian: Also the consolidations and the development of chains. And they were, in a way, antithetical. Most chains were interested mainly in power and profits and many of them issued dividends and used them as mouthpieces for the owners. So chains became a problem. And I was asked to testify. I've got upstairs a few Senate and House publications of my testimony before committees. I testified before twenty or thirty different committees when I was covering Washington.

15-00:23:45
Rubens: And is there an essence to what you're arguing, what your testimony was about?

15-00:23:51
Bagdikian: Depending on what happened to be the big issues of the day that involved the media. Once John Kenneth Galbraith and I testified together on a Senate committee on some episode in which there was very flawed reporting that made a difference in legislation and in public opinion. But there were dozens of hearings where I testified.

15-00:24:38
Rubens: But all in the period—

15-00:24:39
Bagdikian: Issues having to do with the media behavior.

15-00:24:44
Rubens: Right. It seemed to me that in certain ways, your position against the Newspaper Preservation Act was the genesis of your book *Media Monopoly*.

15-00:25:00
Bagdikian: No. The media monopoly was something that I had been interested in seeing develop over a long period of time before that.

15-00:25:12
Rubens: Yes, well certainly when you were at RAND?

15-00:25:16
Bagdikian: Well, before that I saw monopolies becoming a big business rather than papers whose owners were interested in serious news for the public. There are only about a half a dozen newspapers that had that reputation of being serious and competent and covering issues which most papers mentioned only in-brief or not at all. So that was a big change in the nature of news.

15-00:26:00
Rubens: It's not until you're in Berkeley that you get the idea of writing a book called *The Media Monopoly*. Do you remember how you decided that that's what you were going to do?

15-00:26:16
Bagdikian: Yes. The first issue was in 1983, so yes, it would have been after. And I did all my research during the summer.

15-00:26:39
Rubens: Do you remember when the idea came to you that you were going to do a book on that topic?

15-00:26:44
Bagdikian: Well, I had lectured about that so often that I knew a lot about it and I was very interested.

15-00:26:58
Rubens: Did you have an advance from the publisher?

15-00:27:06
Bagdikian: No, I didn't. I did it on my own. I finished the manuscript. I sent it out, and it was turned down. Sent it out, turned down. And finally, Beacon Press picked it up and it became an instant success. Well, a success not in a sense of a popular novel or something of that sort, but it was success for a serious book.

15-00:27:45
Rubens: Why do you think it was turned down? Firstly, did you work with an agent? Did you still have your agent when you were trying to peddle *Media Monopoly*?

15-00:27:59
Bagdikian: I think I still had an agent then, yes. I had a very powerful agent at the Sterling Lord Agency.

15-00:28:16
Rubens: What would you be told when fourteen different publishers said, "We're not going to publish this."

15-00:28:23
Bagdikian: Well, you send it to them and they say, "No, thank you."

15-00:28:27
Rubens: I was just wondering if there was some common kind of critique of the book.

15-00:28:30
Bagdikian: Some would say, "No, thank you, but we'd like to see the next book you do" Others would just say, "No, thank you."

15-00:28:36
Rubens: Okay. So there was never one criticism that you remember?

15-00:28:41
Bagdikian: No, because when a publisher rejects a book it's rare that they bother going into any detail because they get hundreds of manuscripts every week.

15-00:28:53
Rubens: Now, did you have research assistants from your journalism classes that worked on that book?

15-00:29:01
Bagdikian: No. I didn't use students for research. But later I got a research assistant from the School of Library Science at the campus. I called the associate dean, said, "Do you have any bright student who would be a good research assistant?" They gave me his name and he turned out to be superb. His name was Michael Levy.

15-00:29:27
Rubens: And you used him for *Media Monopoly*?

15-00:29:29
Bagdikian: No, the *Media Monopoly* I did totally on my own. All the research for that I did myself.

15-00:29:35
Rubens: Yes. So what was his research for? Was that for that piece you did on California newspapers?

15-00:29:54
Bagdikian: When I needed data, he was very good at knowing how to get it. I used Michael for three or four years. And I hired other people as well. Jessica Abbe later worked on my California newspaper study.

15-00:30:26
Rubens: How did you did you come to publish your sister's memoir?

15-00:31:51
Bagdikian: My sister died and I was the executor of her estate. I spent a year using my sister's typed notes. I found these typed notes in about four loose-leaf notebooks and I spent a year going through that and privately printing *The Memoir of Lydia Bagdikian*. That was a private printing, not a commercial printing.

15-00:34:32
Rubens: Let's talk about you becoming dean of the Graduate School of Journalism. You had been teaching there since 1976. And at first you were a lecturer and then you were a full professor.

15-00:34:49
Bagdikian: No, that's not what happened. I became a full professor when the original dean retired—

15-00:34:53
Rubens: This is Bayley that we're talking about?

15-00:34:55
Bagdikian: Yes. When he retired, I was asked if I would become the dean of the school. And just about the time that Bayley retired, a committee had been appointed by the academic senate at the university to do an review of the School of Journalism. They do this for every department periodically and this time it was about the school of journalism. And the committee said the school needs to be higher quality and it needs to have a dean of national or international repute, like Ben Bagdikian. The committee that was created to find a successor to Bayley was a university-wide committee. And so they asked me to become the dean and said I would be a full professor with tenure. Well, I hadn't been an academic before, and when I asked Marlene, I said, "They want to make me a full professor with tenure. Is that something that's worth doing?" And she gave me a very funny look. She said, "Do you know people spend ten and fifteen years trying to get a full professorship with tenure?

There are people who commit suicide when they don't get it." I said, "Then I guess I should take it."

15-00:37:29
Rubens: Before that happened you were on the search committee for a new dean and you had said you didn't want to be the dean.

15-00:37:51
Bagdikian: Now, let me just think. After I had been dean and ready to retire, we had a search and the chancellors didn't like what we came up with. I said, "Well, I guess we have to have another search committee." But I said, "While we're doing that, don't appoint an acting dean because he won't have any power to do anything." He said, "Well, if you don't take it, I'll appoint an acting dean." So I took it for another period.

15-00:38:32
Rubens: This is in 1985.

15-00:38:35
Bagdikian: I guess so.

15-00:38:36
Rubens: When you retire, there is a special edition of *The North Gate News* in which Ed Bayley said when he was retiring he had been planning on going to England and that the chancellor had told him that if Ben didn't take it or they couldn't find somebody else, he was going to have to come out of retirement. So he thanks you for taking the position. You're dean from 1985 to 1988. For three years.

15-00:39:43
Bagdikian: Yes. And then I wanted to prepare for retirement. And I guess I was on a search committee for the new one, Tom Goldstein, who had been a member of the faculty.

15-00:40:12
Rubens: Okay. And then following him was Orville Schell.

15-00:40:16
Bagdikian: Yes, but that was long after I'd retired.

15-00:40:18
Rubens: Do you want to talk about some of your hires as dean?

15-00:40:32
Bagdikian: Well, I hired the first woman who had been on the faculty at the journalism school, Judy Lynch. She was a lawyer. And Susan Cohen and Joan Bieder — all made a point of having women on the faculty after that.

I was on a committee for the university campus as a whole, while I was the dean, to look at departments. The academic senate has a number of

committees in which the faculty does examinations of their own. And this was to look at the lack of women in the science departments. And the excuse had been that there weren't any women in the science pool to hire at that level. That there were no chemists, there were no computer scientists. There were no women scientists. Well, I discovered that there was a computerized list of all women in United States universities and their disciplines. I called the dean at MIT, who had women on his faculty. I said, "Where did you find these women?" He told me about this computerized list and there were lots of women in the sciences. Before that, the usual way it went was: a chair of a science department had a colleague in another university that he may have been a friend of when he was a professor or a student. And he'd call up and say, "Do you have any good students in geology?" And they'd say, "Yes," and it would be a man. But I found that there were women in the pool. So we did get some women hired. The problem frequently was they wanted to come but they couldn't afford to live in the Bay Area. But we still found ways to hire more women.

15-00:43:13
Rubens: Do you remember other committees that you served on that were university-wide?

15-00:43:19
Bagdikian: No, I think that was the only one that was university-wide.

15-00:43:26
Rubens: How about observations about chancellors that you worked under. Did you know Mike Heyman?

15-00:43:32
Bagdikian: He was my chancellor. He was a good, lively chancellor. Very well liked. George Maslach, Provost of Professional Schools, and I became very friendly and he kept saying, "You got to be dean of this school pretty soon." And I said, "Over my dead body." He said he who lives by dead bodies, dies by dead bodies." George's daughter, Christina Maslach, was on the faculty, too.

15-00:44:31
Rubens: Why is it you didn't want to be dean? You wanted your time free for writing as opposed to—

15-00:44:44
Bagdikian: I didn't enjoy administration. It was a pain in the neck. I wanted to teach and write. The faculty was relatively small when I was there. I'm guessing now. about eight permanent members. And we'd always have one visiting member because we had a fund for a visiting professor of some distinction from elsewhere. And then we had some lecturers without any particular standing.

15-00:47:01

Rubens: So basically there were six people when you first started. You and Bayley would make it six when you started. And then it grew significantly over the next ten years. Especially the television division really expanded.

15-00:47:28

Bagdikian: The television faculty had two or three lecturers and teachers who were members of the faculty but they were all under the dean of the School of Journalism.

15-00:47:47

Rubens: One of the issues I understand is that the school could have gone in the direction of mass communication and that people like you and Bayley were set on it keeping its credentials as a journalism school.

15-00:48:05

Bagdikian: There were many people in universities who wanted a regular faculty progression of PhDs. And you don't get a PhD unless you intend to teach or to do research. Well, we were not a school to produce PhDs. Our highest degree was master of journalism. There was no point in having a PhD. If you wanted to do research, you did it in theoretical communications. And that was a constant dispute back and forth. The people who had not been journalists but who wanted to do communications and including what they called journalism. There was some thought that they should do research, they should get PhDs, but we were not that kind of a school and the good journalism schools have never bothered with PhDs. Journalism schools need men and women to do journalism, not theoretical abstract research.

15-00:49:20

Rubens: Tell me about your course on ethics. You created that course and I understand it was a popular course. How did you structure that course?

15-00:49:31

Bagdikian: I'd announced that sixteen students was the limit. There'd be twenty or thirty who wanted to be in it and it was always very painful, but I would select sixteen. And the ones who were turned down would get on next year's list. It was a very popular course. I would take an example from my experience in real life of what would be an ethical problem and say, "Write a paper overnight and then discuss it the next session. Don't bother doing a big, long research paper. Don't do that. Just put down your opinion of what's right and wrong about this, and then discuss and argue it the next session."

So the students would write a paper overnight and the next session I would get them and ask questions that arose or make statements from other people's statements and said, "What do you think?" And then they would get into a discussion. There was always a lively discussion among them. They always asked me what I would do. I said, "I'll tell you at the last session of this course." I didn't tell them what I would do. It was very popular and it dealt with real life problems.

15-00:51:20
Rubens: Can you think of some examples?

15-00:51:25
Bagdikian: Well, an example. You're a reporter on a paper that covers the cable industry because cable is growing in your home city. Your father happens to be a major stockholder in a cable company. If you're assigned to write a story on cable, do you take that assignment or don't you? And if you do, what do you do about that? And they would have to figure out what to do about that. And only at the final session would I tell them what I would do in each case.

15-00:51:57
Rubens: And what did you tell them about this problem at the end of the semester?

15-00:52:09
Bagdikian: I would ask the editor to put me on a different beat. And if he wouldn't put you on a different beat, send out your résumé and look for another job.

15-00:52:34
Rubens: You were teaching in a period when it wasn't so difficult for a reporter to get jobs.

15-00:52:40
Bagdikian: It's always difficult for reporters to get jobs. It's not even easy for a student from a good university. And at too many places, journalism was the easiest and superficial course.

15-00:53:08
Rubens: Okay. Let me change the tape now.

[End Audio File 15]

[Begin Audio File 16]

16-00:00:29
Rubens: This is tape two on the 27th. You had gone upstairs to look for something.

16-00:00:38
Bagdikian: There are two stories which I have found presented me with the most profound decision-making about life and death while I was living in Providence. One was a young businessman in Providence had developed amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease, which is a progressive disease, which over time destroys your nervous system until your death. And when he was diagnosed with that, he got angry because he found in the medical literature there had not been much research on it. And he wanted that done, even though he knew he was going to die from this disease. So the *Providence Journal* agreed that once a week I would go down to his summer house on Narragansett Bay and I would interview him. And he told me the story of his life and the disease and how bit by bit he was losing his ability to have normal functions and thinking. But he was perfectly clear in his mind

during all of this. It's a kind of cruelty of this disease. For example, halfway through, his voice began to go and we used throat mikes. He had a throat mikes, I had a throat mike. And we would talk back and forth until he got worse and worse and worse.

Summer ended and he was bedridden. He moved home in Providence. He had a substantial family with a large home. And he had by his bed an aquarium. An aquarium I found is kind of a symbol for people who are worried about life because there you see next to you playing out the life cycle of these interesting creatures. It had a pump. And we would talk on the phone back and forth and I'd hear the pump, pump, pump in that aquarium next to him. There came a time when I called and I did not hear the pump and I knew that he had died. His mother came on the phone and said, "Ben, Bill has died." And she said, "But he left a question that you have to decide." I said, "What is that?" *Life* magazine had heard about this series of stories and they wanted to do a *Life* story on his life and his death if they could photograph the funeral. And their condition was they have to photograph the funeral. The family was dead-set against having cameras up and down the aisle during Bill's funeral. By this time I had known them well and I was almost a member of that family. They said, "You decide." And I said, "I am going to decide whether the cameras are going to be there?" "Yes." And I had to think long and hard on that. And first of all, I was torn because Bill wanted the public to know about this disease and *Life* magazine would have told them. But he was gone, and the family was going to live with this. I decided against having the cameras there because this affected the life of people who were alive. It was a very hard decision.

The other time I had to decide about how a man would die, or the conditions of his death, was Elliot Paul. Before World War II, Elliot was a rather popular screenwriter and author. He wrote a book called *The Last Time I Saw Paris.* He was a talented scoundrel of a man. When his wife got a divorce, after he left Hollywood for the East Coast, and was asked at the divorce hearing, "Well, what caused you to separate?" She said, "I don't know. I asked him to get a loaf of bread and I never saw him again." Many years later he had a heart attack and he moved to Rhode Island to his brother's house. And one night I had a party and Mary McCarthy and her then-husband, Bowden Broadwater, were two of the guests. Mary McCarthy was a beautiful, talented woman with jet-black hair parted in the middle. She wrote *The Stones of Florence.* She was one of the most popular writers of the time. She was there. I had invited Elliot Paul to come. He had a woman who attended him because he had a bad heart. As they came in the door, he said, "I'm happy to be here but I'm sorry to say I have to leave at 10:30 because that's what my doctor said." So they came in. It was a lively evening and they began arguing, Mary McCarthy and he, over the Spanish Civil War that preceded World War II. In the opposition to Franco, there were communists, there were anarchists and there were republicans, and they fought among themselves. He had been in Spain during that Spanish Civil War and he and Mary McCarthy got into an argument over a particular incident in which one of the parties fighting against

the Nazis and Fascists in Spain had gathered the people of a community who had been cooperating with the other side and pushed them over a cliff to their death. That was considered an atrocity among the enemies of the Fascists. And Mary McCarthy was on one side and Elliot Paul on the other. They argued very bitterly and she said, "No, it was the republicans," and he said, "No, it was the anarchists." And he said, "My dear, I happened to be in the village at that time. I saw it." She said, "I'm sick and tired of people saying they were eyewitnesses and they don't understand the larger picture," and they went on and on. 10:30 came and he said, "Well, I have to leave, I'm sorry to say," and he very politely said good night. And as he was at the door leaving, she said, "Oh, Mr. Paul, I hope you're not leaving because you lost the argument." Very mean. I didn't hear from Elliot for a while.

Then I got a phone call one day."Ben, this is Elliot. I'm at the Narragansett Hotel." It was sort of second-rate run-down hotel. "I need to go to the library to find a translation of Chekhov that I did with a woman in Paris. Could you come and help me go to the library?" I went there and it turns out that he had been in the second floor of this hotel and he had not paid his rent for weeks. And the manager said, "Listen, we don't know what to do with him. He's a sick man. I don't like to put him out but he hasn't paid his rent for weeks." So I went up and I said, "Elliot, what's happening?" He said, "Well, I'm getting a little bit too old to go out the window to the fire escape with a suitcase and I don't have any money. But the staff comes up and sneaks food to me from time to time. I just need to somehow get out of here." And so I said, "I can take you to the library but I don't know what to do." And he said, "Well, if you would do that, I would be very happy." So they brought him down and the fire department had to come and carry his bed down this long curved stairway of this hotel. Then he got up and he could walk, and he said that was a much more grand way of leaving than out through the fire escape.

We went to the library. Of course, there was no translation of Chekhov. That was just an excuse he had made. I took him out and we had dinner together. He knew music. He was a very talented man. I remember him sitting next to the piano. Providence produced many modern musicians. And he's sitting with his hand on the side of the piano. He knew his music and they knew he knew his music. He said, "I'll go back." His brother lived in Providence. I called him and I said, "You've got to do something about him. He's left the hotel." And his brother reluctantly took him back in and then said, "He said he can't stay here very long," because they'd had a terrible fight. The next call I got he was from the veteran's hospital in Providence. He said, "Ben, I need you here." I went there. He said, "I have made you my executor and I want you to get me out of here and put me on the train to Boston." I think he didn't want to die and have his obituary say he died in a veteran's hospital. I talked to his doctor. His doctor said, "Mr. Bagdikian, if you take him now, you're his executor, you have the right, we'll have to release him. But I'm telling you, he could die before you get out of this building." So I said, "Elliot, I can't do this. You're really too sick." He said, "I do not want to die in a veteran's hospital. I

know I'm going to die. Get me on a train to Boston." And I said, "I can't do it. You won't last." And then we parted and two days later I saw that he had died in the veteran's hospital. But it was a decision I had to make. If he had been well enough to get on the train I would have gladly put him on. But it was a case where I knew he was going to die at any moment, and there was not an easy or happy decision.

[tape interruption]

16-00:16:01
Rubens: And is there anything more to say about being the executor of Paul's estate? Was there anything there?

16-00:16:10
Bagdikian: No. I was the executor. There was nothing there. He had no money, no nothing. The only reason I was an executor, he wanted me to be able to get him out of the hospital.

16-00:16:23
Rubens: Did you have to do anything about the funeral?

16-00:16:30
Bagdikian: No, that's when his brother took over and took care of the funeral.

16-00:16:34
Rubens: Yes, okay. So those were two stories you wanted to make sure we got in.

16-00:16:40
Bagdikian: Yes. By the way, I didn't have syllabi for the ethics seminar because I would take sometimes current problems of ethical problems in the newspapers.

16-00:17:04
Rubens: All right. So let me ask you about a couple of organizations that you were a part of. There was the American Library Association Commission on Freedom and Equality of Access to Information.

16-00:17:25
Bagdikian: Yes. I've always been close to the librarians. I love librarians. They're some of my favorite people. And I had been active in library affairs. They asked me to give the opening speech at the national convention of the American Library Association one year. I continued my friendship and to this day I have a couple of librarians who are very close friends. The Providence Public Library asked me to be the chair of a dedication of their new library a couple of years ago. And one of my librarian friends went to jail because she had been the librarian at Bucknell University when the FBI was investigating. I guess they were investigating the Berrigan brothers. The FBI wanted to know what a person had taken out of the library, to look at the record. She said, "I will not show it to you because library records are not to be used for criminal reasons. It's an open and public institution and I think it's improper." And she spent a week in jail for refusing to do that.

16-00:19:11
Rubens: Do you remember her name?

16-00:19:13
Bagdikian: Yes. Zoia Horn. And her husband, Dean, is a librarian, and they're still good friends.

16-00:19:28
Rubens: So what did this mean for you to be on this commission? What did the commission do on Freedom and Equality of Access to Information. You served on it between 1983 to '87 when you were out here in California.

16-00:19:56
Bagdikian: It was an organization that fought restrictions on government information that had no relationship to military or other secrecy. And, also, I was very active in creating the Freedom of Information Act [FOIA]. I worked very closely with Representative John Moss in order to create it. And we worked hours, and got it passed. And while the government has put up some barriers that shouldn't be there, that unless it's classified, you can write for any government document that is not classified and they are obligated to give it to you.

16-00:26:07
Rubens: When you were involved with the passage of the legislation, the Freedom of Information Act, who did you work with? Do you recall some names of people that you actually worked with?

16-00:26:24
Bagdikian: It was Representative Moss. His research assistant was Sam Archibald. Before that, if I needed something from a congressional committee, I'd ask Sam. In the end it was formalized as the Freedom of Information Act. But he had been very useful to get documents.

16-00:26:44
Rubens: Who is he?

16-00:26:44
Bagdikian: Well, the man who was the chief writer of the FOIA. And his chief research assistant. I'd go to the assistant, I'd say, "Listen, I need X, Y, Z document." And a congressman can call and get it when a journalist cannot. So he'd say, "Please get this particular document," and I'd get it. We had regular traffic. And then I said, "Why don't we stop doing it this way and pass the law saying they have to release documents if it's not classified, and produce the Freedom of Information Act." I still have the clipping with J. Edgar Hoover's writing in the margin.

16-00:27:38
Rubens: That's a great story.

16-00:27:39
Bagdikian: Yes.

16-00:27:41
Rubens: I have one more organization to ask you about. It's related to libraries and information and that's the Data Center. You were on the board of directors of the Data Center, 1990 to 1997. That is something that was started by a librarian friend of yours.

16-00:28:05
Bagdikian: Yes. Well, the Data Center was started by librarians to collect newspapers from all over the world for writers. I had been in Washington. I helped form something called Washington Independent Writers for freelance writers who did not work in a regular newspaper office and they needed copying machines, they needed desks and so forth. And so we formed an organization in Washington. When I moved here, I said, "Let's do the same thing here." And with Zoia Horn and a couple of others, we started something called the Data Center. We had papers from all over the world and they were in drawers that were organized the way librarians knew how to do it. And that's where I got a great deal of the backing for the *Media Monopoly*. And that was very important to me.

16-00:29:15
Rubens: What do you mean by backing?

16-00:29:20
Bagdikian: Well, for example, if I wanted to see how some event was covered, I'd look to see what the London papers said, what the French papers said, what the Italian papers said. And they had those. They had the actual papers, well filed, and I spent a whole summer there doing that. And out of that came the *Media Monopoly*. Many news items absent in the U.S. Press would be in the English *London Times* or *Le Monde*.

16-00:29:48
Rubens: Where was the Data Center located?

16-00:29:50
Bagdikian: It was located in Oakland and they have now grown even bigger. I was on the board for a very long time. Elizabeth Farnsworth, who's on NPR periodically, was also on the board until about ten years ago. Now it's a big operation and it's computerized. It still provides data for writers.

16-00:30:25
Rubens: Anything else you want to say about what it meant to be on the board of directors? Did you raise money for it?

16-00:30:32
Bagdikian: Yes. There was always a need to raise money. We'd send out appeals. We paid our dues and after a while, there were big organizations that would begin giving money. We were in a ratty old building where the owner was sort of sympathetic and he couldn't sell the building, it was in such bad shape, so he let us be there. Now they're in new quarters and it's very grand and they have money.

16-00:31:18
Rubens: All right. Your resume indicates you went on the National Advisory Council of the American Civil Liberties Union. You did that well after you had left teaching.

16-00:31:32
Bagdikian: Yes. That was in Washington. I was in the District of Columbia ACLU.

16-00:31:44
Rubens: Okay. Well, I think we discussed this. On your résumé here it shows that you joined it in 1998. I know you had been on a prison commission study of the ACLU. But this says the national advisory council.

16-00:32:01
Bagdikian: Yes. Well, I guess I was.

16-00:32:04
Rubens: You don't remember anything particularly about that?

16-00:32:07
Bagdikian: No, except that I guess we would periodically support legislation and publicize improper blocking of government information.

16-00:32:27
Rubens: Well, we've been talking now for almost two hours today. Do you think we should call it a day?

16-00:32:34
Bagdikian: Yes, I think so.

16-00:32:38
Rubens: Before we end, I'd like you to look at the shelf list of the papers and manuscripts of Ben Bagdikian that are at Clark University. And one of the first entries is files of research you did on the Sacco and Vanzetti case.

16-00:32:58
Bagdikian: The Sacco and Vanzetti case arose from a 1920 robbery in Braintree, Massachusetts, where from a black car, five people jumped out, killed a paymaster and his assistant carrying the payroll to the workers in the shoe factories there, and got away. The police arrested Sacco and Vanzetti, who were suspected. They were anarchists and immigrants from Italy. One of the investigators was sure that they were the guilty party because it was a time when foreigners, immigrants, poor immigrants, especially Italians, non-Anglo-Saxon, had to suffer from great prejudices.

And I got interested in the case and I interviewed the prosecutors, I interviewed the defense counsel. After a while, very distinguished people became part of the defense because they saw the falsity of the documents that were used. The judge had told Robert Benchley, a popular writer, when they were playing golf together, "I'm going to get those wops." This is the judge

who condemned them. Later, the man who was the expert on bullets and pistols—Sacco had a pistol and he examined it and he said the murder bullet did not come from Sacco's pistol. Well, the prosecutor said, "You can't say that. You can look at it. You got to change the language. We don't want you to say that." He said, "Well, I'm sorry. That's what it shows." But instead of saying it did not come from his pistol, they asked him could it have been fired from a pistol like that? He said, "Yes, but it'll fire all kinds of things." They got him to say it was consistent with being fired from that pistol and it became an international case. This happened in 1920. They were not executed until 1927 and the experts that were against the Sacco and Vanzetti's execution, found that a lot of the documents had been fraudulent, and that the man who had testified that the bullet came out gave an affidavit saying that bullet really didn't come out of there.

And there were some very distinguished lawyers who were in the case and it became an international thing. The Pope sent a message, "Don't execute them," but in 1927 they did execute them. But I knew the man who was the former lawyer of the gang. I got to know the lawyer, who said, "You better look at this book." And it was his, a book about the case that had been put out by a legal publisher with all the Q&As, all the background and the question and answers of the trial. And the paragraph included "Joe, take a look at this. You need to get an answer to this. Joe, take it in. You need to get an answer for this." And I had that. What had been stolen were the money boxes that the paymaster and his assistant were carrying; they had been robbed. And the thieves who robbed them had the money but they threw away the boxes. The boxes had serial numbers on them. I knew the pond where they were thrown in. The lawyer went to the leader of the gang who had done it –he was sick and on his deathbed- and said, "Listen, there's a reporter who wants to ask you about Sacco and Vanzetti because you wrote a confession that your lawyer had." So he said, "He's willing to talk to you." I said, "I want it from himself. I want to ask him a question that only he would know. Where did you throw the money boxes?" So he drove me to his home and the lawyer said, "Let me go in." He went in and he said, "Joe is in a coma." The man died a couple of days later and I never got to talk to him when he was ready to tell me where they were.

16-00:38:46
Rubens: So you ended up writing one magazine piece on that. But had you been thinking you were going to do a book?

16-00:38:57
Bagdikian: Yes, yes. Well, I might have if I finally got what I wanted. But I came very close.

16-00:39:05
Rubens: So you turned in all the material to Clark? It's all there if someone wants to pursue further research.

16-00:39:10
Bagdikian: Yes.

16-00:39:11
Rubens: How is it that you started doing that research? Because you met the lawyer?

16-00:39:20
Bagdikian: No, indirectly. When my mother was in the sanitarium with tuberculosis, she became a very close friend of Alice Stone Blackwell. Alice Stone Blackwell was the daughter of Lucy Stone and did a lot of charity work in Boston. And she and the wife of Felix Frankfurter wrote a book on the Sacco Vanzetti case. And I found it in a bookstore and I read it and I got interested because here were people like Mrs. Felix Frankfurter and Alice Stone Blackwell and they taught Vanzetti how to write. He became a very articulate writer.

16-00:40:20
Rubens: Oh, his last statement before he died is beautiful.

16-00:40:27
Bagdikian: I know. And Ben Shahn did an extraordinary painting of them in their coffins. In the end, of course, they were executed. But the warden had tears in his eyes when he took him to the death chamber. So that's how I got interested in Sacco Vanzetti. I spent a lot of time on that.

16-00:40:54
Rubens: I see that one of your boxes is devoted to "John Service Stories." We didn't discuss that earlier.

16-00:41:09
Bagdikian: During the worst of the Senator McCarthy period and the reactionary period, there was a very strong China lobby which was against our failure to support the nationalists who now occupy Taiwan. They were the previous and very corrupt leaders in China. And two of the most knowledgeable diplomats we had were John [Service] and John Paton Davies in China. Those were the experts in China. They knew the previous leaders, they knew Mao and Mao's assistant—I've forgotten his Chinese name.

16-00:42:54
Rubens: Chou En-Lai?

16-00:42:56
Bagdikian: Chou En-Lai, yes. And so I did a story on John. I tracked him down to see what he was doing. He was one of the most sophisticated members of the State Department. After he was fired by Dulles. A man in Jamaica who was sympathetic with him gave him a job selling plumbing supplies. He was this leading expert on China selling plumbing supplies. So I interviewed him, and he was not bitter. He said, "Well, I think it's a loss of knowledge but I liked him." Later, when I moved here, John Service had moved to Berkeley and I met him again.

16-00:44:28
Rubens: Our office, the Regional Oral History Office in The Bancroft, also did an oral history with John Service, which is available online. So let’s stop for today.

16-00:45:41
Bagdikian: Okay.

[End Audio File 16]

Interview 9: August 3, 2010
[Begin Audio File 17]

17-00:00:00
Rubens: This is our ninth interview and today is August 3, 2010 and you have some things that you want to say about the influences on your life.

17-00:00:14
Bagdikian: Yes. There are some things that don't appear on the printed records of ones life, like résumés and lists of publications, but that were profoundly important in my life, and I'd like to say something about them. We've mentioned some of them earlier in the interview, but I want to call special attention to them.

Probably the warmest and closest influence in my life was my Uncle Fred, who was the youngest brother of my mother. Now, he had another brother who did some important things but not what Fred did for me. His brother was Steven, who came over to this country earlier than the rest, went to work for the Waltham Watch Company, and when my mother and father got married, he made a special watch for them. And my father would take it out periodically and show me the beautiful work. Just delicate, wonderful work. And on the face of the watch it said Aram T. Bagdikian. During World War I, the Americans had a disadvantage because the Germans could shoot through their propellers straight ahead but the Americans had to shoot only from the side. Steven was the chief person who worked out the clockwork so the Americans could shoot through the propeller without hitting the propeller. Well, that was Steven. He died later on, after the war, in a plane crash in Connecticut. He was a pilot.

Well, it was his younger brother Fred who was a huge influence in my life. Fred's contribution to my life was to learn that ability to enjoy life regardless of circumstance and, as a part of that, to never judge anybody by their social status or their work. He was a mechanic and a truck driver but he knew Italian operas. He had a beautiful voice. He was a wonderful storyteller. I would ride with him on his truck all night with him. When I was born he got me my first baby shoes and when he died eighty-four years later, I held his hand while he was dying. So he was a profound influence in my ability to not judge people by surface and to realize that no matter how hard your circumstances might be, there's a way you'll enjoy life and better things in life. So that he was that kind of a man. He lived with us for a short time after my mother died until my father remarried.

17-00:03:55
Rubens: And in one of our earlier interviews, you talked about spending a summer with him that was very important.

17-00:04:04
Bagdikian: Well, there are a number of people who are important that way but he was the chief one. In my late teens and early twenties, there was somehow a collection

of five people or so, young people. It was probably because in a book store I met a man and he turned out to be a book collector. He worked in a factory. He lived in the third floor of a tenement house, which became a kind of a meeting place for my group, and he had a good music recording machine. We would listen to Italian operas and singers. His special interest was books on ethnography.

17-00:05:05
Rubens: What was his name?

17-00:05:06
Bagdikian: Carl Calderara. And he had such a good collection of ethnography that when a friend who was from Yale and had connections told him, he said, "We've heard about him. Will you ask him to please will to Yale those books on ethnography." So this man who worked in a factory and lived in a tenement has his books in the Yale Library now. That taught me, of course, something else. You can be poor, you can live in a tenement, but doesn't mean you're dumb or without deep interest.

And then I had a group which doesn't show up in any formal kind of list of publications or career changes. And there were about five of us. Two of them were painters, one was from the Rhode Island School of Design, then there was a sculptor who won the Prix de Rome and there was another one, Bob. White, whose grandfather was Stanford White of the famous firm of McKim, Mead and White, who not only designed Madison Square Garden and great estates, but his own house in Long Island. Also had a famous affair. Got in all the scandal sheets. But we visited their house a number of times, my group of five friends.

17-00:07:03
Rubens: These were college friends, is that right?

17-00:07:04
Bagdikian: No, no. This is my late teens and early twenties. We jointly, the five of us, somehow had a Studebaker coupe, an old one, which was somehow our group car. We'd say, "Carl, are you using the Studebaker? I'd like to use it." But we would go to Bob White's house on Long Island, Box Hill, and McKim, Mead and White still existed. We would go there and we'd have a meal. They had in their backyard, I remember, two Greek temples. Real Greek temples that came from Greece, ancient Greece. And there in the backyard, one temple on one side, the other temple on the other side. And the maid stretched a rope across, from one temple to the other, and hung the family wash on the rope.

There was another member of our group who became a movie producer and produced a number of sort of mediocre films. We had another one who had a graduate degree in theology from Brown University and had the foulest mouth you ever heard. So we had this group of ours. We traveled together. The one who was at that time in the conservatory of music in Boston would get a

student ticket to concerts at Symphony Hall. He'd have a student ticket. So we'd line up to go to this very expensive concert, the five of us, and the first one would tell the ticket taker, "Oh, he's got the ticket. He's got the ticket." And when he got to the last, there was one ticket. This man would say, "Where are the tickets for the other people?" He'd say, "I don't know the other people." But we traveled together and we did very good things together. That was very important.

There was another thing that doesn't appear in the formal record. Now, I considered myself unattractive because I was an Armenian kid in a Yankee town and the most desirable characteristics were blond, blue eyed, white sweater with a colored stripe on the sleeve. I thought if I asked someone at the senior prom to dance she'd say no. I had a very strong sex drive. I remember necking with the prettiest girl in the neighborhood. She was similarly inclined. Later on I met my wife and we married and had two children.

That also taught me. Now, my wife came from a working class family who lived in a tenement and she learned how to become a skilled operator of something that was a precursor to the computer. A comptometer, they called it, to do spreadsheets and things of that sort.

And then after my mother died, I was three years old, and there was my father, had an infant and four teenage daughters. After a year he married a woman who couldn't have been more different than my mother. My mother was a poet. She knew several languages. She was highly respected. But my stepmother was a very different kind of person. She'd been brought up in an English orphanage during the genocide and she could be cruel. I used to dream of two things: chocolates and sex. I'd go to the store in our town and I'd have to pass by a cabinet with big chunks of chocolate. One day I took ten cents of change and bought the chocolates. And they knew I should have ten cents and I didn't. And my stepmother had this habit of telling my father how he should beat me. It was always very extreme. "You should hit him. You should beat him until he feels his bones will break," and she'd go on and on in almost a psychopathic way. And my father would take me outside, quietly say, "Don't do that again."

He and I had not a warm relationship but I respected him and he respected me. He was an extraordinary man. He was born a peasant. He got himself an education. He became a professor. He became a man of some substance. He knew high officials in the British government in the Middle East, yet he arrived in this country with a wife who was immediately diagnosed with tuberculosis and went into a sanitarium and there he was with an infant and four teenage daughters. So a year later he married this woman who couldn't have been more different. She had a very cruel tendency. They had two children. She would try to pit us against us but my older stepbrother always wanted me to be with him and we were friends for life.

17-00:14:26
Rubens: And his name was?

17-00:14:28
Bagdikian: Ted. Theodore. They named him after my father. He worked his way through the New York Manhattan School of Music by playing piano in a mafioso dive. He did that at night to earn enough money. And the mafioso's daughter took a shine to him. Got on the bench of the piano, sort of snuggled up to him. The mafioso didn't like that much and he went over to my brother, Ted, and said, "You play the piano, I pay you good. You touch my daughter, I kill you." Ted, whenever he was in trouble, no matter where I was and what I was doing, if he called I would go to where he was. One time he almost died. He was in Jamaica Hospital in New York when I was giving a big speech somewhere and he sent a message. "Come as soon as you can. Your brother is in the hospital." So I went there. I looked at him. He had tubes coming out of him. His mother, my stepmother, was hysterical. She wanted to pull the tubes out. She wasn't very thoughtful of anything. There were a couple of nurses and doctors outside his room. I went in and I could see that he was going into shock. I went over there and a couple of the nurses are eating, and the doctor eating potato chips. I remember sweeping the potato chips aside and grabbing them. I said, "Come inside. My brother's going into shock." They came in, they were very excited and he survived. But always he would call for me.

And then he himself turned out to be a very good man. He became a music teacher at a high school in Long Island. Each of them would take part. I think I told you that he'd take them to an opera that they had practiced all year at the Metropolitan at Lincoln Center and they would see their opera in which they knew by personally playing it. I think I learned even though his mother was so prejudiced and that she tried to favor her children against us, it didn't work. There are people who are attracted to each other, trust each other.

But I did grow up in a divided family. There were many terrible quarrels with the original family, my four sisters and myself, versus my stepmother. And those would be long, rancorous, bitter and a divided family. I think it could have had negative effects but I had the saving grace of the mothers of my closest three friends, who seemed to understand that and they would take me on their vacations in the summer with their sons. So these mothers of my friends, some of those friends were friends for life. One is still living in Long Beach. He's a retired surgeon. But his house was another haven for me. A warm house. It was the mothers who noticed that, not so much the fathers. There, again, I didn't dismiss all Anglo-Saxon Yankees in New England. There were differences and I learned that by experience.

Also, I knew my mother, even though I only have a vague memory of this woman in the sanitarium. Once she was permitted to visit the house. I have a vague memory. I would have been about three years old and she was in a gray dress and then she had to go back. I remember my uncle and my father leading

her down the front walk and her going away. That's, of course, the only time I ever saw her. But I have her poetry still. She became very friendly with Alice Stone Blackwell, a philanthropist in Boston. They exchanged poetry. She wrote poetry in English, Armenian, Turkish and then something called Armeno-Turkish, which is Armenian characters with Turkish words. My father also knew several languages. He knew Arabic, Turkish, Armenian, English, Aramaic and the theological languages. So that I, in a way, absorbed the values of my mother.

On my stepmother, the fact that my father never did what she would demand of him in disciplining me. Later in life, I began to realize what an extraordinary man my father was. Now, Uncle Fred was the closest one but my father, when I looked back, he was a man who was born a peasant, got his own education, became a man of substance in the old country, landed penniless in this country, had to find a house that had altitude, which is what people with tuberculosis were supposed to be treated with. He also had to have a public transportation to the big Armenian congregational church in Cambridge, which asked him to be a pastor. He had wanted to be a doctor, but he obviously couldn't go to medical school. He became a pastor. He was capable of the hardest work I've ever seen anyone do.

For example, he wouldn't do the family shopping at the local chain markets. Once every two weeks, he and I would go to Boston to Faneuil Hall. Fanueil Hall on Saturdays was filled with wholesalers. One corner for the people who sold meat, another for certain vegetables. Each vegetable had its own big crowd. They had paper bags with loops on them. He knew how to bargain. And a real old fashioned merchant expects you to bargain. They don't have respect for you if you don't. They name a price that they know is too high and you know is too high but you very politely talk. He said, "Well, that's too bad. It's a little high for me." "Well, what if we lower it to this?" "No, I don't think that—" He goes on. It's a kind of social interaction that is, in a way, the excitement for both parties. He would do that. He would get almost entirely two weeks food and they had these paper bags with the roped loops on them. He would fill it with cuts of lamb, cuts of beef, with vegetables, with all the stuff we'd eat.What did not come from his gardens, which were always huge, would come from those bags. He would carry three heavily laden bags of food. And if I went with him, I'd have one in each hand and barely stagger up the hill because we lived in a house that was on a slight incline and about three-quarters of a mile from the end of the trolley line. He would have the strength to carry those up the hill. He had strength to do his garden. He had strength to paint the entire house, which required a ladder that went three stories high. Was not a big house. It was an ordinary house. He did all of those things on his own until the very, very last. At the same time, he had a deal with his second wife. She was very devoted to him. They cooked together. They got along together.

But my sisters had very high expectations of me. A relative would drive us around northern Massachusetts and we'd go to the richest towns and there would be the big mansions and my sisters would say, "Ben, when you're a doctor you're going to live in a house like that." But they would then have their own careers and they made their own careers. One sister became a skilled nurse and could have been a very high level surgical nurse and chose to marry a working class man. The other one, Lydia, had to go to commercial high. For her whole life, she spent every summer in Paris perfecting her French. My one sister, my father's favorite, went to Radcliffe.

17-00:27:05
Rubens: Who was that?

17-00:27:06
Bagdikian: Cynthia went to Radcliffe and pretty much separated from the family there. And my younger sister, Nora, was the jokester and she was beautiful. She had jet black hair parted in the middle, lots of boyfriends. She moved to Maine, opened up a beauty parlor in an empty store and first thing you know she had the best beauty parlor in Ellsworth, Maine. Then she moved back to California for a time. Because I did not marry a woman of status, I married a working class woman, my first wife—

17-00:28:10
Rubens: She had sung in the choir of your father's church.

17-00:28:14
Bagdikian: Yes, she was in the choir and my father was very surprised. He said, "I hope you two haven't kissed each other yet." I decided I would not speak to that.

17-00:28:35
Rubens: Her name was Betty Ogasapian.

17-00:28:38
Bagdikian: Yes. She turned out to be very funny and very bright. Her mother was a wonderful woman who used to come and visit us. We would play cards and she would cheat at cards. But it was part of arguing and bargaining back and forth. I was closer that way. So I had this odd combination of my peers in the teenage and young man, some of whom came from old families, famous families and good families, who traveled together with us. At the same time, had this very strict kind of household that was divided and frequently bitter.

But Uncle Fred was the one who really taught me don't judge people by their work and by their social status. No matter where he went, people loved him because he just exuded joy. He was Frederick Uvezian, Uvezian being my mother's maiden name. I named one of my sons after him. I still have his brother's gold watch that he gave when my parents got married with my father's name on it. It's upstairs in my study. It's over a hundred years old. When I wind it, it begins to work. Periodically, my father would open it up. It has two gold doors on it to protect the delicate inner works. And he'd say,

"Don't touch it because there's grease on your finger." He would let me look at it. I was just fascinated with it. Beautiful interlocking machinery. As I say, to this day, I wind it a couple of times, it still works.

My group traveled all over the East Coast and swapped this old Studebaker among us and covered the social range, as I say, from a man who lived in a tenement but was a book collector. That was where we'd meet. And then during the war, we'd try to arrange leaves at the same time and we did for the most part, with only one or two absences. And we'd gather at Carl's house. During the war there were food stamps and if you didn't have food stamps you couldn't buy meat, you couldn't buy anything else. Of course, if you're in the military you didn't have food stamps. And so when we were on leave, we did not have food stamps. So when that group came together, I was the designated Jew. I looked more Jewish than any of them, although two or three of them were. And I could go to a bakery with this Air Force uniform on and I would say, "I'm sorry, I don't have any food stamps," but the clerk would give bags and bags of nice things from the bakery to the nice Jewish boy in an Air Force uniform.

17-00:33:06
Rubens: Was it a Jewish bakery? What was the significance of being Jewish?

17-00:33:12
Bagdikian: Probably, probably. Yes, I think it was. And so I was the designated Jew among non-Jews.

17-00:33:19
Rubens: So none of the other boys were Jewish?

17-00:33:22
Bagdikian: Yes, some were. Two of them were. But, again, one of them was one of the most famous Yankee families in the country and another one grew up in Connecticut.

17-00:33:38
Rubens: Do you want to say these men's names?

17-00:33:45
Bagdikian: Well, okay. The man who came from a very distinguished family, we called him Bob I. He was Robert White. His father was the son of Stanford White. And that firm still existed. Then Carl Carlderara was the man who lived in the tenement and had the ethnography collection. Sol Bloomstein, who changed his name and became a Hollywood producer. George Irving, his father's name was Shelaskey, but for the stage his name was Irving and he became a successful man on Broadway. It was a very odd scene. After the war, he got together and we all gathered in New York because we were going to make our fame and fortune in New York but we didn't have any money. So we rented a room in a sort of sleazy tenement on 97th Street near Broadway. There were two twin beds. We pushed the twin beds together and we slept crosswise, the

five of us across the twin beds. There was a nice girl down the hall and she said, "If there are any calls," and she had eight names there, "please leave a note on my door," because she was a model and she used a different name.
One by one, that group of five peeled off.

17-00:35:45
Rubens: Now, you had already been married but you were looking for a home in New York and your wife was—

17-00:35:54
Bagdikian: Yes, I had a job in New York, so I was looking for a home.

17-00:36:02
Rubens: Were any of these men married?

17-00:36:07
Bagdikian: Let's see. One got married during that same period. He peeled off, went to Columbia and he met someone there and he got married. What happened was they would have a girlfriend and they'd peel off and stay with them and then one by one they got jobs. George got a part in a new musical right after the war, had a very good part. In the end, there was just Harold Buck and me. And now, one weekend I'd go back home to Providence and the other week I'd be looking for homes in New York. But during that time, Harold had some odd experiences. He was with the first group that entered Japan after the war ended. He was in the counterintelligence corps. And he said very strange things. They'd approach a Japanese village. It said, "Welcome, conquering heroes." Very odd. He wrote a story about his experiences. The American soldiers were huge and the Japanese were smaller. Their chairs were too small and the beds were too small. Very odd things would happen. They were very interesting stories. I said, "You ought to write about that." He started to but he was not a writer. He said, "You write it." So he'd say things and I'd take notes and then I wrote it. He said, "I think I'll go to *The New Yorker*, see if they'll take it. He went to *The New Yorker*. To our joint surprise, they took it. He came back and said, "They took it. They took it." I said, "That's wonderful." Then I said, "Who is the author going to be?" He said, "By Harold Buck." I said, "Harold, you didn't write that. I wrote that. You go back and tell them it's got to be a double byline." He came back and said, "They don't have double bylines." And so if you look in the April of 19—

17-00:38:52
Rubens: It's '46 or seven.

17-00:38:53
Bagdikian: Yes. There's a story and the author is Harold Bagdikian Buck.

17-00:39:04
Rubens: We talked about that.

[tape interruption]

Let's talk about your two children.

17-00:39:17
Bagdikian: The oldest is Christopher.

17-00:39:20
Rubens: And was he named for anybody?

17-00:39:25
Bagdikian: No. I had always read Christopher Robin and read to him when he was a baby Christopher Robin. So I liked Christopher. My father thought I'd named him for biblical reasons, which was the last thing on my mind. It was Christopher Robin but I didn't want to tell my father that.

17-00:39:56
Rubens: And he was born in 1944. And then Eric had been named for your uncle Frederick.

17-00:40:14
Bagdikian: Yes. He was born in 1951.

17-00:40:17
Rubens: And you gave him the middle name of Haig. What is Christopher's middle name?

17-00:40:27
Bagdikian: He is Christopher Ben. When I let my father know he said, "Oh, I'm so glad. Christopher in its original meaning means bearer of Christ." I didn't have the heart to tell him that's not what I had in mind.

17-00:40:48
Rubens: You didn't tell him?

17-00:40:50
Bagdikian: No.

17-00:40:50
Rubens: Are there any more influences on your life that you want to talk about?

17-00:40:58
Bagdikian: In the divided family, it was divided not just emotionally but periodically physically. I can remember half a dozen instances when I was very, very young. In our house in Stoneham, when you came in the front door there was a hallway and then there was a stairway going upstairs with a landing and then turning. Many times there would be a very bitter argument between the two sides. And my four sisters and I would be at the landing at the stairs and my father and his second wife would be at the bottom of the stairs at the newel post. Now and then she'd have a suitcase, obviously threatening to leave, and there would be very bitter arguments. I had this mixture which was one of great contrasts. There was a kind of bitterness in the house, of some irrationality. For example, I would go to my friend's houses to play. Some of

them had very elaborate toys, led soldiers, and we'd have little cannons to knock over the soldiers; or there were electric trains we would play with. Then they'd say, "Well, let's go to your house to play." My stepmother would not let them come in the house and we'd have to sit on the front steps. I'd take out our encyclopedia and we'd sit on the front steps and look at the encyclopedia, which is very strange.

George Irving—many young men at that time affected a curved stem pipe, a kind of philosophical look—he had one of those. Made of meerschaum. The only time I smoked was in anatomy when I had to work on a cadaver that had formaldehyde in it and to kill the smell I would have a pipe. That's the only time I did it, in self-defense. But once George, who had the curved stem pipe, picked me up and by accident left it in the house. He said, "By the way, when you go back home will you look for my pipe?" I went back and I asked my stepmother, "Did one of my friends leave a pipe here?" And frequently she wouldn't answer. She just shook her head. I knew that meant that she wasn't going to tell me. I found it later in a closet and it was all scarred as though she had beaten it with a hammer or something. That very strange mixture which alienated me from her, but not from my father. At the same time, having this warm and very exciting group that I was with and they were talented and very funny and laughable. That lasted all through the war.

There was another very close friend. Nothing to do with the group we were in. He lived on a farm outside of Worcester and he was a classmate at Clark University and we edited the paper together.

17-00:45:26
Rubens: What was his name?

17-00:45:27
Bagdikian: Albert Southwick. He's still alive. He's still writing. He lives in the town of Leicester outside of Worcester. I used to walk four miles to the campus every day and four miles back home. He walked eight miles every day and eight miles back. It's a sign of what families who didn't have a whole lot of money, who lived respectable lives, and simply got used to adapting by things like walking eight miles a day, sixteen miles a day. He and I correspond periodically now by email and we used to see him in person. He and Marlene became very good friends and he grew from a farm boy—they lived off vegetables that they grew during the Depression—who then grew up to be sophisticated. Turned out we both flew similar planes during the war. I think I told you that my stepbrother, Ted, and I were very close and during the war how we found out where each of us was. And afterward, after he sowed his wild oats during the war, he became a wonderful music teacher.

17-00:47:17
Rubens: When was Ted born?

17-00:47:24
Bagdikian: He was born in 1925. He was in New Guinea in World War II, in the navy; it was like a work battalion. The first thing they did when they moved from island to island was build a mansion for General MacArthur.

17-00:47:46
Rubens: I don’t think you told me the story of how you kept in touch with each other.

17-00:47:59
Bagdikian: Well, let’s see now. He knew that I was training at an airfield in Louisiana. And he knew the name of the town and the airfield and he would send me a request for a record. He would say, “Will you get me, if you can, the RCA Paderewski with this and this number on it?” And I think he would say, “I think the number is on that,” and he had a whole series of numbers that are supposedly on the record label.” Well, I looked at those numbers and I realized they were latitude and longitude. So I would write back, “The Columbia doesn’t have that on it but RCA has a recording of that and here’s its numbers,” and I’d give him my latitude and longitude. And that worked because when we had a leave we came to San Francisco at the same time. He was on Treasure Island and I came in from March Field in California. I went down there. There were still ferries on the Bay at that time. We’d go to an Armenian restaurant. Any Armenian boy in a uniform got a big free Armenian meal in San Francisco.

17-00:49:59
Rubens: You didn’t mention your other half-brother.

17-00:50:06
Bagdikian: My sisters were the rational element in the household beyond my father. After they all left and I left, he was then basically alone. My father was busy with his church and so forth. My stepmother was bringing him up. And she was an odd woman. She would not take him outside because she was afraid he’d grow up too dark and he would be sickly.

17-00:50:42
Rubens: What was his name?

17-00:50:47
Bagdikian: His name was David. He, left on his own devices, became caught up with a very sleazy crowd and he had a very bad time. When I’d be home, my father would say, “Can you speak to him?” and I’d talk to him but he’d say, “Oh, I just have these guys. We just have a good time.” Then he was drafted and went to Japan, married a Japanese woman. They had a son. And he then behaved very badly. He ignored them when he shouldn’t have and then he himself got diabetes and he lost a leg and he died in Arizona. I remember Ted and I would pitch in and buy him a TV set and buy him things he needed. But he died young and it was very sad.

In addition to being an Armenian kid in a Yankee town, I considered myself unattractive and had a rather low opinion of my social standing. I was not a terribly good student. It wasn't a terribly good high school. I could do most of my homework the day it was due before the teacher came in. But I had enough Latin—we had two years of Latin, translating Julius Caesar. I would not normally do my homework but I was a great sight reader. But I loved the Latin language and I considered periodically during my adulthood that I would learn Latin. I just think it's a wonderful language. Not the theological language but the classical Latin. Except that it has all kinds of crazy declensions and so forth. So I could get by with minimal work in the high school.

17-00:53:45
Rubens: But you're telling a story. Something about not being an attractive—

17-00:53:48
Bagdikian: Yes, feeling very unattractive. Only later, finding there were girls who thought otherwise. But I just had this fixed feeling because the high school heroes didn't look like me. They were all WASPs. The most important people in town were WASP. In Massachusetts, town council members are called selectmen, and they were all Anglo-Saxon. They were not foreigners. Foreigners were Irish, Jewish, Catholics even. I think I've mentioned before we had two weekly papers, a Catholic and a Protestant. But I was very lucky in that the mothers of my friends became substitute mothers.

17-00:55:01
Rubens: We have just a few minutes left on the tape. I don't think you mentioned the Catholic and the Protestant newspapers.

17-00:55:09
Bagdikian: Yes. There were two papers and one was Catholic and it was known to be Catholic and the other one was Protestant.

17-00:55:18
Rubens: Was one a morning and one an evening?

17-00:55:20
Bagdikian: No, they were weeklies. They would be sort of taken for granted. The Irish were very quick to make fun of non-Anglo-Saxons. The fights you would get into usually were with Irish kids. Now and then an Italian kid but mostly Irish. And later on I had a long period when I got fascinated with Irish authors. Sean O' Casey and so forth. But not because of that.

17-00:56:13
Rubens: When was that? We didn't talk about that.

17-00:56:14
Bagdikian: Later. After the war. But in our family, I think it was my mother's legacy and her thought. But all the girls had learned music. So Tirzah played the piano, Lydia played the violin, Cynthia sang, took singing lessons, and Nora learned

how to fake playing the piano because one of our two pianos had a roll of paper, automatic piano, and she would take the carpet that was over the piano bench and turn it so that you couldn't see that she was pedaling to make the rollers make this very elaborate music. So when we had visitors my father would say to whichever girl was in the house, "Do something for our guest." When it was Nora's turn, she would hide the pedal, what she'd be doing, and then she'd play these things that must have been made for four hands. Very elaborate. Bang up, down. The guests would all be saying, "Why that's remarkable. She's remarkable." There'd be compliments. In the middle of that, she'd stop and turn around, music's still coming out, saying, "Did you like that?"

17-00:58:04
Rubens: Did you learn to play an instrument?

17-00:58:09
Bagdikian: I had to take violin lessons and the biggest problem was a gang would wait. If you're carrying a violin as a kid, you're always a target. They would wait for me and I'd have to run around a different block and I'd always be afraid that I'd break the violin. But I didn't practice. A badly played violin is torture.

17-00:58:36
Rubens: All right. We'll change the tape now.

[End Audio File 17

[Begin Audio File 18]

18-00:00:00
Rubens: You published *Media Monopoly* in 1983.

18-00:00:09
Bagdikian: Right.

18-00:00:10
Rubens: Then twenty-one years later, in 2004, really the twentieth anniversary of it, you published the new *Media Monopoly*.

18-00:00:22
Bagdikian: Yes. Each edition of the seven editions was changed to keep up with what was happening. So they are not all the same in content. Much of it is, but the first one I'd spent a long time writing it. I spent a lot of time going through foreign newspapers and collections and domestic papers and magazines, getting things from the Census Bureau. Great book. The U.S. Abstract, issued every ear is also great. Then I wrote the entire manuscript without having a publisher and mailed it out. It was turned down by fourteen publishers and finally a publisher in Boston, Beacon Press, which was then very close to the Unitarian Church where I had become a Unitarian. But they finally took it and it took off. It just came out at the right time. I was maybe lucky that it didn't get

printed at first. The second edition is very different from the first and the third different from the second and so forth, because the scene was changing.

18-00:02:06
Rubens: Dramatically.

18-00:02:08
Bagdikian: Both the printed media and broadcasting. So the new media monopoly involved some of these newer things like television and the internet. But what it meant, of course, was that these very large corporations controlled not just the print. They would make collections so they would have an influence on television and radio.

18-00:02:47
Rubens: Including magazines. They were vertically integrated.

18-00:02:55
Bagdikian: Yes. And in every medium. And they also became ideologically and were from the beginning, for the most part, conservative. But in the beginning there were some more liberal papers. The Pulitzers, Louisville, Baltimore, Saint Louis, Denver. They were good newspapers there. *Milwaukee Journal*. As a matter of fact, Mr. Bingham, who had *The Louisville Courier Journal*, wanted me to become the editor of his paper. I went there—

18-00:03:55
Rubens: This was when you were still with *The Providence Journal.*

18-00:04:04
Bagdikian: Yes. He invited me down to their estate in Louisville and he had a daughter and three sons and this extraordinary series of accidents. The first son, to whom he had planned to leave the paper—very important to him to maintain the value of the newspaper. But I went down there and they treated me as though I was royalty. He showed me how they were going to build a cultural center and things like that. But I decided I didn't want to live in Louisville and I felt unhappy disappointing him because we were fairly close. Then his oldest son died when he was stringing up some lights around their estate for a big party and he got electrocuted. The second son, they vacationed in either Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard and he had a surfboard through his side windows and he went too close to a telephone pole. One end hit it and the other end broke his neck. And that left a third son whom he had confided to me was not his first choice to take over. And he had a daughter and the daughter was so angry that she was not left to run things that she sold her stock to Newhouse, Sam Newhouse. She went on with her bequest, with her considerable income, to become one of the starting editors of *The New York Review of Books*. So there was a case of where I got involved with a man I admired who put out the kind of paper I thought was a very good paper and yet I didn't want to live in Louisville. First, I liked New England, but secondly, by that time Washington beckoned.

18-00:07:11
Rubens: Okay. So this was when you were still at Providence?

18-00:07:16
Bagdikian: I think so. Yes. Because some of the series I did for *The Journal* were put out afterward in a pamphlet form. It would go to papers around the country and the better papers reprinted them and the others noted them. Yes.

18-00:07:39
Rubens: So you're telling me about the new *Media Monopoly*. Did it surprise you how successful this book was? Did you understand the cord that you had touched in American culture?

18-00:07:54
Bagdikian: Well, I was also always surprised by good things happening. It was by that time the media were no longer considered a giveaway course in the fifties. Before that, if you were a student at a second-rate college and you didn't want to do any work, you took journalism, which was nothing. So that serious work in journalism, which was a lot of work, was not done very often. There were histories but they tended to be based largely on the calendar, when things happened, rather than looking at the content and their social impact.

18-00:08:57
Rubens: Do you remember how this special edition of *The Nation* came about? This is in 1989. This is six years after *Media Monopoly* had come out. You'd already done a couple of revisions.

18-00:09:12
Bagdikian: Well, then it became an international movement where in every developed country there were people who tried to control the media when they could. Bertelsmann in Germany and *The London Times* after Rupert Murdoch bought it. So it became international and the United States foreign policy began to involve news from these countries so that what you learned about what American interests and military and diplomatic people were doing in foreign countries became a matter of concern so that the global village was real. A lot of it was influenced by Marshall McLuhan, who foresaw that these new media would change things.

18-00:10:23
Rubens: Well, he thought it would be a liberating democratizing influence and you saw this consolidation and vertical integration being quite different.

18-00:10:36
Bagdikian: Yes, when it became big enough, they became influential with the public. And that interested advertisers. So as the papers became bigger, covered a larger part of the population, advertising began to transfer, or at least expand, out of the slick magazines into print. Technologically, too, the technology of newspaper printing also changed. Before it was all black and white or on very poor quality paper. Then as advertisers began to be seriously interested, they didn't want print on a flat piece of paper, they wanted print on glossy paper.

So the paper had to be better quality. Not glossy, necessarily, but enough to make colored reproductions attractive to advertisers. And that brought in big advertising and that brought in a tug of war between the journalists and the advertising departments and it took very bizarre forms. At one point *The Los Angeles Times* had two editors. One was a journalist and one was a representative from the advertising department and together they'd decide what the paper would carry. It produced very embarrassing kinds of corruption of the news so that it became a different kind of phenomenon and much more complex. When I think now, I'm glad I don't have to do a complete description of public communication because the day you write it, it's obsolete. Yahoo and Facebook, Google, all of these things then become so fast moving, so highly developed. The blogs now are a medium, mass medium. Earlier, the only thing was really *The Drudge Report*, which was a radio and computerized rumor factory. But now it is something that takes every medium into account.

18-00:13:46
Rubens: So do you have hopes that the internet can produce more of the global village that McLuhan envisioned or do you think that it's leading to a big brother kind of—

18-00:13:59
Bagdikian: Well, that's always the danger, is that as they become more powerful and control more media, they have a danger of also making the country extremely conservative. Now, we are fortunate, in a way, that the politics of the country after the McCarthy period, after FDR, there was a war. Then the McCarthy period and the enemy was communist Russia. The Soviet Union became the drawing out of people who used the fear of the Soviet Union, which, of course, was a brutal dictatorship. Used it as an anti-liberal campaign in the United States so that if you wrote about the power of corporations you were singing the Soviet song for them and it got to be a very nasty kind of back and forth. I must have been asked to testify a dozen or more times before committees in the Senate and the House on these matters because suddenly they were important. And there were not many people who had background in it or who were not known promoters of a single point of view. So in that way I got involved with the Congress and I think played a role in the creation of the Freedom of Information Act.

18-00:16:01
Rubens: You also testified several times about the anti-democratic nature of the FCC. I wanted to ask why have the FCC and the SEC not taken a more forceful role to regulate monopolies?

18-00:16:26
Bagdikian: Because during the conservatism that came in during the period of the Soviet Union, the conservatives used it for political influence for the agencies of government. That included the Federal Communications Commission, which had been very liberal before. They had denied licenses to people who had a

record of being prejudiced in their other work. Mr. Wrigley in Chicago was denied a license because he had publicly argued against labor unions and that they weren't trustworthy to the old FCC. As the Cold War developed, conservatives gained influence and the FCC then became of interest to them because they wanted to be able to avoid actions that would lead to rebukes of inaccurate reporting by the media. There was a constant dispute on that in which the conservatives kept the majority of the FCC pretty late in the game at a time when it meant a great deal. For a long time, there are only two out of the five who were appointed by Democrats and the rest were Republicans.

18-00:18:47
Rubens: Appointments to the FCC are at the discretion of the President, isn't that right?

18-00:18:55
Bagdikian: Well, you can do two things. The basic thing is to pass regulation and administer them in ways that you see fit, and secondly, work to get a majority on there that would end the practice of seeing all liberal programming as being somehow building up the Soviet Union.

18-00:19:33
Rubens: Of course the president has the power to appoint members to and to designate the head of the FCC.

18-00:19:47
Bagdikian: Yes, and if you have a conservative Congress and you have a conservative President, they're going to control the FCC. And it was that way a long time.

18-00:20:14
Rubens: So there was no significant change during the Clinton Administration?

18-00:20:17
Bagdikian: No. During a very important period, the two minority members of the FCC were speaking around the country about the problem. And that didn't change until American politics had changed. Now, of course, it's out of control because of the technology.

18-00:20:43
Rubens: When you published in '83, you said that there were basically fifty companies that dominated the media. By 2004, twenty years later, I think it was down to twelve. I don't remember the numbers.

18-00:21:02
Bagdikian: I think it was maybe less.

18-00:21:09
Rubens: Well, then you talk about the five men who controlled the media. It went from fifty to five.

18-00:21:14
Bagdikian: Yes.

18-00:21:15
Rubens: Richard Parsons at Time Warner, Eisner at Disney, Sumner Redstone, the head of Viacom, Rupert Murdoch and Reinhardt Mohn Those were the five that you identified.

18-00:21:32
Bagdikian: I think so. Yes.

18-00:21:32
Rubens: Yes. So why is it that the FCC doesn't limit the number of, for instance, radio stations that one company can control?

18-00:21:45
Bagdikian: Well, they do. You have to get a license. They can give it or not give it. They could deny a license for all kinds of reasons.

18-00:22:02
Rubens: But I heard you once argue that there should be a limit on how many radio stations one company should be allowed to control. Thirty is a bit much.

18-00:22:15
Bagdikian: Well, because too much power in the hands of very few people. And it's the communications of the public in general that's being controlled. And if you were a dictator, one of the things you want to be sure of is that broadcasting is something you control. So that became a very hot subject in American politics.

18-00:22:51
Rubens: Yes. So do you have hope for the internet? Do you think that the internet does through blogs, and through news sites on-line such as Truthdig and through the Drudge report, do you think there's going to be a kind of democratizing, some kind of significant critique?

18-00:23:07
Bagdikian: I think it's a constantly changing scene. I don't think there's a fixed answer that is durable more than two years.

18-00:23:19
Rubens: Do you think you're going to do any more revisions? Do you collect information still?

18-00:23:40
Bagdikian: Yes, but I think it is such a very complex international scene that I doubt that anybody who wants to encompass the entire picture, it'd be so difficult and time consuming that by the time they got through they'd be obsolete. So you've got to look at the extreme cases that you can narrow down on or you do the best you can. The same with the appointments to the Supreme Court. Depends who's in Congress and the politics of the Congress.

18-00:24:32
Rubens: Yes. Last year there was the Citizens United case that came before the Supreme Court where the court ruled that corporations could give unlimited contributions to political campaigns?

18-00:24:46
Bagdikian: Well, that's when you see that kind of power of appointment. And that opened the floodgates. So I think we're going to suffer from that for a long time.

18-00:24:56
Rubens: Yes, absolutely. We all had great hopes for the Obama Administration and we're worried now about the midterm elections for the Congress.

18-00:25:09
Bagdikian: It's not very promising looking for the midyear election. At this point, it looks as though it's not impossible that the Republicans could control the House. It's very precarious right now and I think Obama is beginning to show the kind of intensity of attention that goes beyond his original philosophy of reaching across the aisle, of bringing people together. Well, you can't bring enemies together very easily. The Republicans and conservative Democrats are now not so reliable as they were right after they swept Congress. And I wish he had been stronger and had a much more ambitious program. On the other hand, he was served a very difficult plate. The economy was falling apart, not due to him, the Bush tax cuts had left the country broke, the creations of new kinds of banking and financial transactions that nobody had thought about ten years ago became so unwieldy and involved so many billions that the old regulations were very minor influence. Now they're still trying to see if they can control some of those worst practices because it scared even some of the conservatives. But not enough.

18-00:27:24
Rubens: Do you think we've reached a good place to end for today?

18-00:27:30
Bagdikian: I think so.

18-00:27:31
Rubens: Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]

Curriculum Vitae: Ben H. Bagdikian

Married: Marlene Griffith Bagdikian.

Graduated Stoneham, Mass. High School, 1937; Clark University, B.S. 1941.

Reporter, Springfield Morning Union, 1941-1942.

Aerial Navigator, U.S. Air Forces, 1942-1945.

Reporter, foreign correspondent, Chief Washington Bureau, *The Providence* (R.I.) *Journal*, 1947-1961.

Project Director, Mass Media Technology Study, Rand, 1967-1969.

Assistant Managing Editor for National News, *The Washington Post*, 1970-1971.

Assistant Managing Editor, Ombudsman, *The Washington Post*, 1972.

National Correspondent, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 1973-1974.

Project Director, Newspaper Survival Study, Markle Foundation, 1974-1977.

Professor, Graduate School of Journalism, University of California at Berkeley, 1976-1990; Dean, 1985-1988; Emeritus, 1991.

President, Mellett Fund for A Free and Responsible Press, 1966-1970.

Screening Panel, National Endowment for the Humanities, 1967-1970.

Board of Directors, Committee to Protect Journalists, 1981-1985.

Trustee, Clark University, 1967-1976.

Steering Committee, National Prison Project, ACLU, 1974-1981.

Social Science Research Council, Committee on Mass Communications and Political Behavior, 1974-1980.

American Library Association Commission on Freedom and Equality of Access to Information, 1983-1987.

Board of Directors, Data Center, 1990–1997.

National Advisory Council, American Civil Liberties Union, 1998.

Contributor: *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly, The Nation, The New York Sunday Times Magazine, The London Times, Mother Jones*, etc.

Books: *In The Midst of Plenty*: *The Poor in America* (Beacon Press, 1964).

The Information Machines (Harper & Row, 1970; Japanese Edition, 1973; Portuguese Edition, 1973; Spanish Edition, 1975).

The Effete Conspiracy and Other Crimes by the Press (Harper & Row,1973).

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The Media Monopoly (Beacon Press, 1983; Japanese Edition, 1984; 2nd Edition, 1987; 3rd Edition, 1990; 4th Edition, 1993; 5th Edition, 1997; 6th Edition, 2000; 7th Edition, 2003).

Double Vision-Reflections on My Heritage, Life, and Profession (Beacon Press, 1995).

The New Media Monopoly (Beacon Press, 2004).

George Foster Peabody Award, 1951.

Sidney Hillman Foundation Award, 1955.

John Simon Guggenheim Fellow, 1962.

Sigma Delta Chi National Journalism Award, 1975.

Brown University, LHD, 1961; Clark University, Litt.D, 1963; Berkeley Citation, 1990; University of Rhode Island, LHD. 1992.

Citation of Merit, "Journalism's Most Perceptive Critic," American Society of Journalism School Administrators, 1978.

Rhode Island Journalism Hall of Fame, 1992.

James Madison Award, American Library Association, 1998.