

Too Good To Check

How journalists create myths and legends, not least about themselves.

By Edward Kosner

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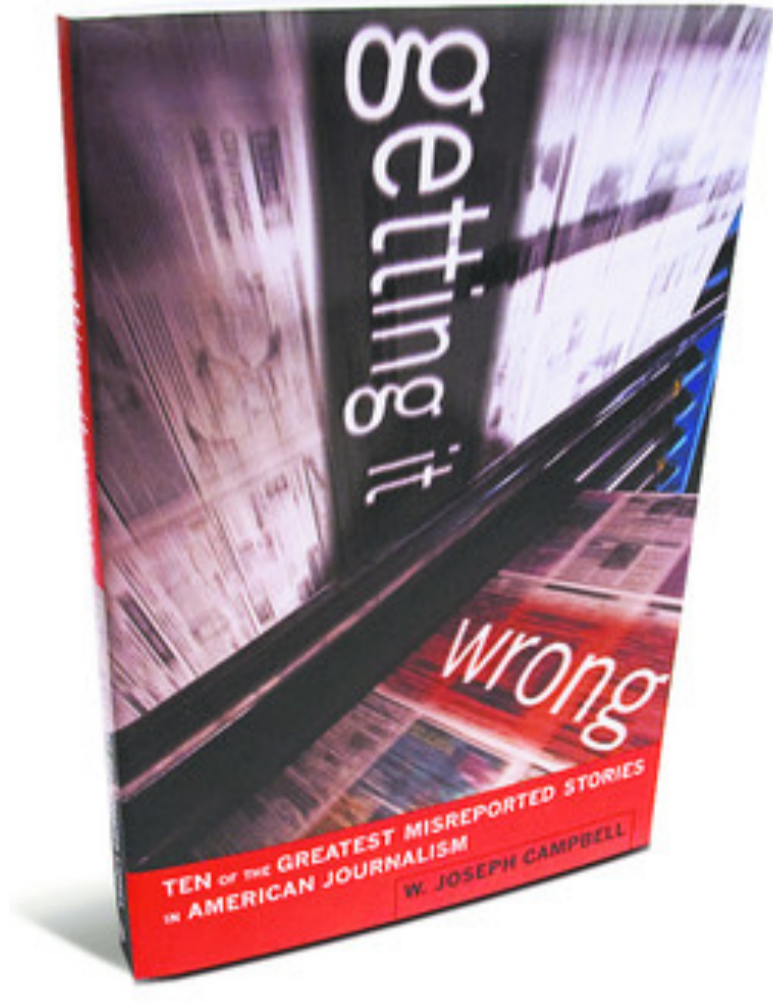
SAVE PRINT TEXT

Hello, city desk, get me rewrite. Here's the lead: Many of the landmark moments in American journalism are carefully nurtured myths—or, worse, outright fabrications.

William Randolph Hearst never said, "You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast didn't panic America. Ed Murrow's "See It Now" TV show didn't destroy Sen. Joseph McCarthy. JFK didn't talk the New York Times into spiking its scoop on the Bay of Pigs invasion. Far from being the first hero of the Iraq War, captured Army Pvt. Jessica Lynch was caught sobbing "Oh, God help us" and never fired a shot.

These fables and more are lovingly undressed in W. Joseph Campbell's persuasive and entertaining "Getting It Wrong." With old-school academic detachment, Mr. Campbell, a communications professor at American University, shows how the fog of war, the warp of ideology and muffled skepticism can transmute base journalism into golden legend.

Mr. Campbell's examples run from the Spanish-American War to Hurricane Katrina, with oddities like the feminist bra-burning at the Democratic Convention in 1964 sandwiched in between. In each case, the author teases out the grain of sand around which the pearl of the myth was spun.



GETTING IT WRONG

By W. Joseph Campbell

(University of California Press, 269 pages, \$24.95)

the crusade against McCarthy; Drew Pearson had been dogging the senator for years. Indeed, McCarthy's popularity was plummeting before Murrow went on the air on March 9, 1954. "The news," wrote the New York Post's TV critic, was "that television was saying it at all." It was the Army-McCarthy hearings soon after the broadcast that really sealed the senator's doom. Once again a movie, this time George Clooney's "Good Night, and Good Luck" (2005), locked in the myth for new generations.

Cronkite is lionized for a CBS News special report in February 1968 in which he urged the U.S. to negotiate a settlement to get out of Vietnam. Watching the broadcast, Lyndon Johnson exclaims, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America." The public turns against the war, and a month later Johnson announces that he will not run for re-election—or so the legend goes.

Mr. Campbell finds scant evidence that LBJ ever saw the show. David Halberstam appears to be the first to attribute the remark to Johnson, in paraphrase, but none of the president's intimates remember him saying anything like that. What really changed LBJ was a mix of pressures, especially the Democratic primary in New Hampshire in March, in which the antiwar candidate Eugene McCarthy nearly beat him. At first Cronkite soft-pedaled the influence of his broadcast, but as the years went by he embraced the myth, telling Esquire in 2006: "I was amazed that my reporting had such an effect on history."

The story of JFK pressuring the New York Times to play down its Bay of Pigs reporting, according to Mr. Campbell, is the confused result of an actual Kennedy intervention 18 months later when he induced the editors to withhold a story for 24 hours during the Cuban Missile Crisis. JFK helped fortify the myth when he mischievously told a Timesman after the Bay of Pigs: "If you had printed more about the operation, you would have saved us from a colossal mistake."

Mr. Campbell pins two of his myths directly on the Washington Post. The Jessica Lynch fable had its inception, he says, in a Post story based on intelligence sources who misinterpreted Iraqi battlefield reports. They somehow mistook Lynch for the real hero of the engagement, Sgt. Donald Walters, a cook in her unit who lost his life while single-handedly holding off Iraqi ambushers. The Post, Mr. Campbell says, was also a leading culprit in promoting the 1990s myth—based on the flimsiest of scientific evidence—that the infants of crack-smoking mothers were doomed to lives crippled by mental and physical problems.

The Post's immortal Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein also come under Mr. Campbell's critical gaze. He argues that the myth of "the heroic journalist," inspired by their Watergate-era reporting, obscures the reality that it took "special prosecutors, federal judges, both houses of Congress, and the Supreme Court, as well as the Justice Department and the FBI" to force Richard Nixon out. Journalism, in this reading, kept the scandal alive while the authorities did the real investigation and exposure of Nixon's crimes.

For all Mr. Campbell's earnest scholarship, these media myths are certain to survive his efforts to slay them. Journalism can't help itself—it loves and perpetuates its sacred legends of evil power-mongers, courageous underdogs, dread plagues and human folly. At the end of the book, Mr. Campbell offers some remedies for media mythologizing, urging journalists, among other things, "to deepen their appreciation of complexity and ambiguity." Good luck with that, professor.

Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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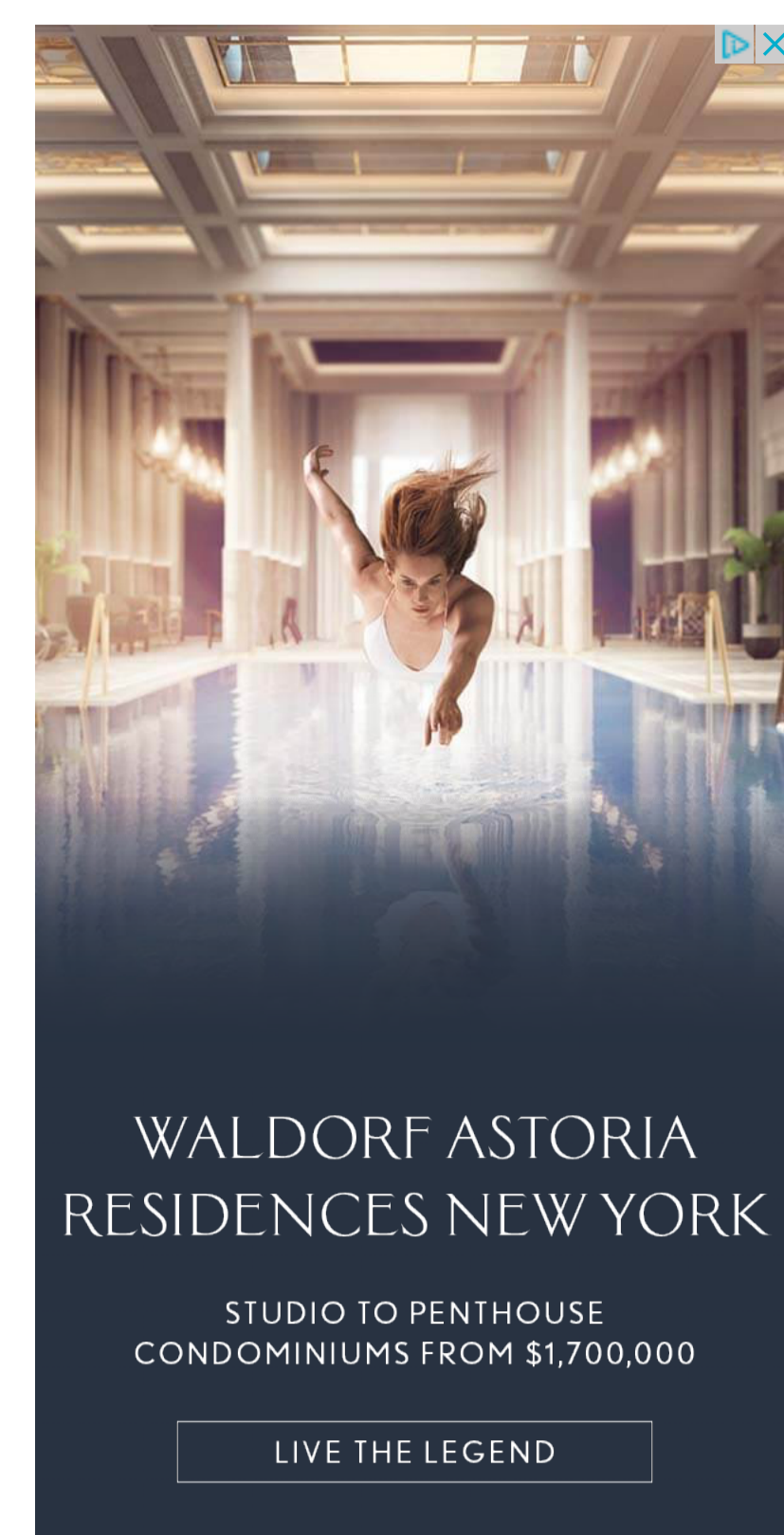
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