

MR. DORSEY'S WORLD

Mr. Dorsey, my first managing editor, was a tall man, thin and slightly stooped, with the look of an emeritus classics professor disapprovingly contemplating the decline of civilization. Walking across the newsroom to his office in the far corner, he held himself a little stiffly, with his eyes fixed so intently on the path to his destination that he seemed not to see anyone else in the room. He was in his late fifties, one of those men whom it was impossible to think of as ever having been any other age. You imagined he had been born wearing a three-piece brown suit and puffing irascibly on a cigarette in a small holder.

The veterans called him Buck, but to the younger reporters he was always Mr. Dorsey. His full name was Charles H. Dorsey Jr. He had an enclosed office, but often he sat at a desk just outside his door, facing the newsroom. From that perch he could look out at his whole domain but he rarely seemed to be doing so; most of the time, he was frowning down at something on his desk. Behind him was a wall of large windows through which you could see the roofs of East Baltimore stretching off into the distance. Often you could also see a large seagull perched on the windowsill, waiting for a handout from the copyboys. They named the seagull Buck, after Mr. Dorsey, and kept feeding it despite a succession of edicts forbidding the practice.

In Mr. Dorsey's world, as I came to understand it, virtuous work and honorable purpose existed nowhere in the universe except in our fifth-floor newsroom, with its battered metal desks and scorch marks on the floor from the frequent wastebasket fires caused by carelessly discarded cigarettes. Outside there were only scoundrels and miscreants determined to keep his reporters from getting news that Mr. Dorsey desired for his newspaper.

On occasion, his ire at one or another such scoundrel overcame his usual aloofness and led to spectacular eruptions. The most memorable of these during my time was a profane shouting match late one night with the governor of Maryland. The subject under discussion was a report on an official investigation of mismanagement and misconduct in the Baltimore Police Department. Articles in the Sun had led to the investigation in the first place, but (not accidentally) the report was being released with an embargo that would let our rival evening papers publish the story before we could. This displeased Mr. Dorsey, and he had waked up the governor to tell him so – loudly and at length, with uncomplimentary references to the governor's character and ancestry. This took place not in the privacy of his office, but on one of the city desk telephones in the middle of the newsroom, in a voice that could be heard by his awed staff from one end of the room to the other. The embargo, we sensed, would not withstand Mr. Dorsey's wrath, and it didn't. Thinly covered by a smuggled photograph proving the paper had had its hands on an unauthorized copy that did not carry the release date, we broke the embargo and published the story.

An absolute rule in Mr. Dorsey's world was that none of those untrustworthy souls outside the newsroom was to be given even the most inconsequential influence or authority over his staff. For that reason, the Baltimore Sun in those days was the only big-city paper I've ever heard of whose reporters did not carry press cards issued by the police department. Those who gaveth press cards, Mr. Dorsey reasoned, might also decide someday to taketh them away, and that was not to be tolerated. Thus the Sun issued its own. From time to time there were disputes

over access to a fire or crime scene (an envelope of cash was kept in a drawer at the city desk to be used as bail money when one of those discussions led to an arrest, as occasionally happened) but on the whole the system worked reasonably well.

Mr. Dorsey despised journalism awards, especially the Pulitzer Prize. Once, he summoned a talented but extremely eccentric reporter named Dick Levine, author of the aforementioned reports on the Baltimore police, into his office to tell him that his series was to be submitted for the award. As Dick reported the conversation to his colleagues, Mr. Dorsey glowered at his potential Pulitzer prizewinner for a moment and then harrumphed: "Mr. Levine, the promotion department having prevailed over my vigorous objection, I have to tell you that you are being nominated for a Pulitzer. I can only hope that you will not further tarnish the honor of this newspaper by winning it." (He didn't.)

Mr. Dorsey would be just as vigilant in protecting us from the forces of darkness in our own building too, or so we believed. If anyone from the advertising department presumed to come up to the fifth floor to seek a favor or try to suppress some story that might embarrass an advertiser, we were sure Mr. Dorsey would be waiting at the elevator door, possibly with a shotgun, ordering the offending ad salesman back down to the second floor where he belonged.

Thinking about it now, I wonder how I came to have such a clear picture of Mr. Dorsey's world. It couldn't have come from him, because he never said anything about it to me. He hardly spoke to me at all, in fact, or to any of the young reporters. On those rare occasions when he had something to communicate to one of us, he preferred to do so by scribbling a laconic note in pencil on a sheet from a makeup pad, and sending it over with a copyboy. He would watch from his corner to see that his note was delivered, and, if the recipient looked over in his direction, give a short bob of the head and then quickly look back down at his desk, warding off any attempt to come over and actually talk to him.

Messages to the newsroom at large were typed and posted on a bulletin board next to the wire-room door, behind which a row of machines jerkily clattered out the news of the day onto long strips of teletype paper. Mr. Dorsey took some pains to make those memos elegant and terse. I remember one advising the staff that management, in one of its periodic cost-cutting efforts, was going to reduce the amount of space given to editorial content. It said (this is from memory after nearly six decades, but I'll bet it's not off by more than a word or two): "Word has gone out from Caesar Augustus that all space shall be cut. This means eliminating nonessentials: nonessential words, nonessential paragraphs, nonessential stories. Reasonable compliance will spare me the necessity of eliminating nonessential people." We enjoyed the turn of phrase, though I do not remember that his injunction led to any noticeable reduction of nonessential words, paragraphs, stories or people.

We took Mr. Dorsey's communication (or noncommunication) style as part of his general crustiness. But it was also something else, I came to think. One day a few months after I came to work at the paper I was assigned to work the early shift on the city desk, actually five desks pushed together in a shallow T in the center of the newsroom. When I arrived, Mr. Dorsey was at his desk in front of the windows, but there was hardly anyone else in the room. I sat down on the opposite side of the city desk from Mr. Dorsey's and was opening the day's pile of press releases, when, astonishingly, he beckoned me to his desk. I got up, walked around the city desk and over to his. When I got there he asked some inconsequential question – where had I gone to college,

or something of the sort. I answered. He nodded, then dropped his eyes back down to whatever he'd been working on. After standing there another moment, I decided I had been dismissed and started back to my seat. I had almost gotten there when Mr. Dorsey summoned me again.

I circled the city desk once more and returned to his. He asked another innocuous question, nodded at the answer, and again looked back down at the papers in front of him. Once again I started back to my seat, only to be called back for still another trip around the city desk and another question. About then, I believe, it dawned on me what was going on: Mr. Dorsey was trying to be friendly, and wasn't very good at it. From then on I thought it wasn't just irascibility that kept him so icily distant from his minions, but shyness too.

If I didn't learn about Mr. Dorsey's world from any conversation with Mr. Dorsey himself, I certainly didn't learn about it from any ideological or philosophical instruction from him or any of our other senior colleagues. It must be remembered that this was still in the era when hard drinking, not self-importance, was the major occupational disease of journalists. We didn't talk about our ethics or rights and responsibilities or read articles about our role in a democracy. If there were such creatures as media critics or if universities or think tanks were holding symposiums on journalism ethics or "the changing role of media," we never heard about any of that on Calvert Street. (I'm not sure think tanks had been invented yet. Even if they had, the op-ed page hadn't, so no one knew about them.)

Still, somehow, I know I wasn't wrong about Mr. Dorsey's attitude. Working for him you understood that being a reporter for the Baltimore Sun was a sacred trust, the only job one could do and look into a mirror every morning without shame. Breaking that trust would put you in outer darkness forever. Mr. Dorsey demanded that we do the job honestly and well and made sure to the limit of his powers that no one on Calvert Street or anywhere else would prevent us from doing so. For that, with all his crankiness and inscrutability, most of us would have stepped in front of a truck if he'd asked us to.

A couple of years after I came to the Sun, the Newspaper Guild went on strike. It was a fairly turbulent one, no major violence but lots of minor scuffles on the picket line and sporadic rocks flying at vehicles coming in or out. The paper didn't publish for about six weeks, the first time it had missed an edition, as far as anyone knew, since its founding in 1837. ("If this kind of thing is going to keep happening every 128 years," a printer said one night in the jampacked bar down the street that was our unofficial strike headquarters, "I'm going to look for another job!") Mr. Dorsey, by all accounts, was devastated; his scowl, when we glimpsed him being driven to or from the building, looked even grimmer and more haggard than usual. It's possible he may have had some secret sympathy with our complaints about the Sun's notoriously miserly salaries. But I am sure that in his eyes, closing the paper was unforgivable treachery whether our grievances were justified or not.

To show that we were not abandoning our responsibility to the public, the striking journalists put out their own newspaper while the Sun was shut down. We named it the Baltimore Banner. The managing editor was a large, easygoing rewrite man named Ralph Kennan, who had come to the Sun from the Army newspaper Stars and Stripes and whose speech was an amazing stew of military and newspaper cliches and his own peculiar jargon. Ralph never said he was going to write a story. Instead, a dozen times a night, he would announce: "Time to

storify my notes." When the makeup man called from the composing room, Ralph notified the city editor exactly the same way every time: "Paul, engine room on the blower." Cliches aside, he was competent, patient and unflappable, a good combination in view of the stupefying array of production and other obstacles that had to be overcome to get the strike paper out.

The day the Banner's first edition hit the street, Mr. Dorsey arrived at the Sun Building (whether driving or being driven, I don't remember) and, instead of driving through the shouts and jeers into the company parking lot, stopped right in the middle of the picket line. The Guild represented not only the newsroom staff but all the white-collar employees in the building such as telephone operators, clerks, ad takers, and others who didn't know who Mr. Dorsey was, just that he was another of the bosses we were striking against. Dozens of them surged toward his car, waving their strike signs and shouting. He peered out in search of someone he recognized, blotting out the commotion with the same single-minded look as when he crossed the newsroom. When he spotted a familiar face, he rolled down the window and – in almost the only compliment I can ever remember him uttering – barked, "Tell Mr. Kennan he has done a fine job." Without waiting for an answer, he rolled up the window and drove on into the parking lot.

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