ROBERT SCHEER: ABOVE THE FOLD

[Transcript]

Introduction

Scheer: The press that's enshrined in our Constitution, our First Amendment-- free press was often a scurrilous press. We're supposed to trouble the government. We're supposed to challenge the government.

The US drops thousands of tons of bombs on the Vietnamese people every day. How can Nixon claim to be upset about a few eggs thrown at him?

Weills: We were trying to exercise every tactical stratagem we could to stop the war in Vietnam.

Richardson: Where Ramparts really gets lift off is when Warren recruits Bob Scheer. Bob does the interview with Jimmy Carter, where Jimmy Carter says he has lust in his heart.

Scheer: If you think crimes have been conducted in your name by your government, then you have an obligation to become a whistleblower. We are not the indispensable agents of history. When we come to believe we are, we do much more damage than we do good.

[Title Screen]

Vidal: He's of the same line as Walter Lippmann and Murray Kempton and Izzy Stone. These are journalists who are, essentially, historians, but they're historians dealing with living history. They don't have to go back to the books, to what other people have written.

Scheer: Maybe because I grew up among immigrants. You know, where I grew up in the Bronx, I mean, foreign languages were everywhere and everybody was coming from some other place and had some story. And I grew up loathing-- loathing-- an America-centric view of the world. And I always had the idea that everybody matters.

My parents were garment workers and I knew they mattered. I knew their friends mattered. I knew the people in my neighborhood mattered. Some fell off. My father would take me down to the Bowery, show me people who were lined up to get food. No one ever gave me a reason to think that these people were not equal to me and to anyone else. I was always raised with the idea there was an inherent value to human life.

“This is my interview of you”

Lear: What I don't feel I know is what makes you tick. What happened to you at 11, or 12, or 14, or earlier that turned you on to the kind of citizen you are?
Scheer: Oh, it was just in the air. I was born in ‘36. My mother was the other woman.

Lear: What do you mean the other woman?

Scheer: My father was married, had a couple of children. They met on a picket line. They were both garment workers. My father was a German Protestant, my mother was a Russian Jew. They happened to fall in love. I got my father’s name. I knew I was a good street hustler. I was working when I was 12 and 1/2. I could make deals. I could run orders.

Lear: What kind of deals?

Scheer: Anything anybody wanted. I could sell sodas at the Garden. I could do it at Lewisohn Stadium. I was a good hustler.

Lear: What’s the cleverest thing you ever hustled as a kid? What was your cleverest hustle?

Scheer: Oh, my cleverest thing was standing in front of the Garden and looking forlorn, like a street urchin. Hey mister, you got an extra ticket, guys? I don’t know. Let me see if she shows up. The girlfriend didn’t show up. He gives me the tickets, maybe giving me both. I run around to the other side of the Garden and sell them. I was doing that three, four nights a week, yeah. It was called mooching. But let me ask you because I have to say something. You’ve been my role model, OK. I don’t want to embarrass you and I’m not making you responsible.

Lear: But I feel the same way about you. All you’ve got on me is youth and smarts, and a lot of smarts. Wait a minute. This is my interview of you.

Scheer: Well, I was sort of born into an environment in which you could not avoid politics, for all sorts of reasons. I was born in 1936 in Bronx Hospital, April 4th, 1936. And my father lost his job that day. And this was, for him, the beginning of the Depression. He didn't get it back until the war came along.

My father's family were German. My mother's, Jewish. My father's family in Germany was killing my mother's family in Lithuania. Those were all live issues. Relatives would arrive from the respective old countries. So half my relatives in New York were German Protestants. Half were Russian Jews. I went from one to the other. And what united them was politics. They all were on the progressive side of things. My father had been a wobbly and a socialist, and very briefly even a communist. Was thrown out of a party for leading a wildcat strike at the New York knitting mills. My childhood game was killing Krauts, except my father was clearly a Kraut. Had a strong German accent. And all my German relatives, on the other hand, they were very strong antifascists. They were more strong antifascists than anyone else I knew 'cause they, particularly, had been involved with Spain and supporting the struggle against fascism in Spain.
My mother came over from Lithuania when she was 21. My mother, in Lithuania, had been involved in this group, the Jewish Socialist Blend. And two of her sisters were killed by the tsar's police organizing.

Through this group, the Jewish Social Blend, I used my mother to carry messages in her hair. And one terrifying scene, she went to a town to deliver this message to someone who had already been arrested. And she was put up near the prison by some sympathizers and she could hear the fellow being tortured all night. It was an important family story.

Her group had been, for a short time, allied with the Bolsheviks. And then Lenin denounced their group. Then suddenly, they were hunted people. This revolution that they had fought for was now gone south for them. My mother knew negative things about the Soviet Union quite early. She was a sympathizer, in that she still felt the revolution was a progressive agency, up to a point.

You've got to remember, New York City Council, when I was growing up, had three communists on the city council. Everybody forgets about the history of the communists in the United States. They were very involved, and maybe at the center of the whole Civil Rights Movement, as they had been very important to the labor movement.

“Four for a quarter…”

Lear: It was a question of survival for you.

Scheer: Yeah, well, when I read Margaret Sanger in the early birth control movement, I'm the person they didn't think had to be born, right? Parents didn't have good jobs, and so forth. How do you take care of a little kid? My mother's a garment worker. I'm parked in a carriage by my uncle Leon's fruit stand. And I can, to this day, hear, "four for a quarter, four for a quarter from Florida.”

Look, I was raised by the women in my neighbor because my mother was working. So the women who stayed home, they’d make sure, “hey Bobby, you've got to have some milk,” or “did you get some lunch?” Miss Nussbaum, down on the third floor, I had to check in with her when I came in. I was a third grader. And I would say, among my circle of friends these days, I'm the only one that's actually been food-deprived. Food was an issue, OK.

So when I was 12 and 1/2, there was Meyerowitz's grocery store right on the corner of this project at the coops. And I was already starting to deliver orders. So Meyerowitz got this idea-- he had a big station wagon-- that he would get the milk delivered to his store, and then he'd put it on the corners around this project, which was like, basically, three blocks going that way. And then he would have kids deliver the milk at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning. Only, no other parents would let their kids do it. So I was the only one. My father thought that, yes, you have a job. That's good.

And when I was doing my milk deliveries-- let's see, this was about '48, 1949. I made this discovery, because I'm the only one out there, and I'm seeing all these books by the garbage cans.
And I remember two, in particular, that I dragged home. One was the collected works of Stalin. I think it was 12 or 13 volumes. It was kind of red covers. And one was the collected works of, amazingly enough, Thomas Jefferson. There were big green volumes and the collected letters and works of Thomas Jefferson. I think there were 20 of them, or something, 25 of them. And I brought them to this tiny, little apartment we had. I had him under my bed. That showed you the temper of the time. People were afraid. The FBI was all over this neighborhood. We called them the feebees. You could tell them by their antennas, unmarked cars. And people were arrested. And I brought Jefferson, I remember, with me to graduate school in Berkeley. So I had them with me up till then.

“Everybody has a story”

Look, it was an atmosphere that could have soured me and I could have become very out for myself. I could have-- I want to feather my nest.

Lear: What's the strongest reason why you didn't?

Scheer: Because I enjoyed people, I really did. I found my salvation on the street corner and the candy store and the neighbors playing ball. I just liked it. I liked the people there.

Lear: Was anything at all, the experience you've just described, that suggests journalism would follow?

Scheer: I liked everybody's story. Everybody had a story, and I had no hierarchy of whose story is important. But somebody once said about journalism, in any story, I want to know who's getting screwed and who's doing the screwing. And that has been the motto of my whole life, OK. I don't like people getting screwed over. I want to know who's screwing them over.

**Graduate School, Berkeley**

I arrived at Berkeley. And what was really exciting was not Berkeley. What was exciting was North Beach. And that was the beats, beats and jazz. Tremendous jazz in San Francisco, as good as there was anywhere in the world. And you had the beatniks, and the beatniks were reading poems to jazz. And the marriage of poetry and jazz.

So I wrote a piece about Allen Ginsberg, which was an attack on the traditional left. It was called Poet is Priest in Root and Branch, kind of a student lefty magazine, saying, listen. The old left was all wrong and Ginsberg is right.

Zeitlin: Bob and I hadn't gotten together yet, so I think he showed up, in my life, anyway, in 1958. And he was, what-- he probably announced to me a term I had never heard, a "red diaper baby," and that we're almost all red diaper babies, David Horowitz among them, probably the most left wing of the whole group.
Scheer: It was an incredible group and we put out this publication, Root and Branch. And so Horowitz, who then, soon after, wrote a book called Student, celebrates, quotes something I wrote in Student, showing the free spirit of the New Left and how we were not at all inclined to be communists or suppress free speech, but quite the opposite. And I was held up as the poster child.

All of us rejected these communist countries. We all knew they were totalitarian. That was not an issue. Horowitz, however, rejected it from a Trotskyist position. They should have had permanent revolution. Others, I think Maurice would be one who rejected it more from a social democratic position and democracy, workers control.

And the negative on Berkeley was that it was now a conservative suppressed campus. Because California public education, higher education, had come under a late variant of McCarthyism. And we had the big loyalty oath battle, or they had had the big loyalty oath battle. And the federal Un-American Activities Committee, which was blacklisting people, which was getting people fired and imprisoning them, that became, actually, one of the first big demonstrations in the Bay Area, was against HUAC, a very important part, which I participated in that first year that I went out there.

Zeitlin: And so we planned to have a demonstration, a peaceful demonstration, picketing against the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Scheer: We met with a few other graduate students at Berkeley. We say, hey, they're coming here, we should do this. We put out the word, and so forth.

Zeitlin: So we organized. We made signs, we organized the picket, and went and picketed.

Scheer: And our great concern, actually, was that it not get disruptive. This was early on. This was just 1960 and there hadn't been much of this.

Zeitlin: But what was great was, somehow or other, we got to talk to Harry Bridges before that.

Scheer: Harry Bridges was, himself, a target of HUAC. So you had your warehousemen workers, your Longshore. And in those days, Longshore was still a big activity, unloading boats by hand and track. And so you had a strong labor movement that didn't want HUAC coming there and harassing people.

Zeitlin: So that day of infamy, there were over-- I mean, I hope I'm not exaggerating. There were several thousand dockworkers who showed up. OK, so that really was a danger, that you have ordinary workers from the left union that are now marching there.

Scheer: And so we thought they'd would be agent provocateurs, and so forth, who would come and become more disruptive when we were there to hand out our leaflets and give our message of what was wrong with HUAC.
Zeitlin: But there were these kids from Stanford University who went into the building, banged on the doors. "Down with the committee. Down with the committee. Abolish HUAC."

Scheer: And the next thing you knew, our whole crowd out there on the street rushed into the building.

Zeitlin: Sure enough, of course, all of a sudden, the cops come racing out.

Scheer: They brought out these hoses and flooding down the steps. The steps were quite steep and slippery, and we swept down. They hosed us down the stairs and people were arrested.

Zeitlin: The cops come beating people with their clubs on the head. One of the kids, I still remember her, Mary Macintosh, she was bleeding like this. And this is not a joke. They come in and they're going to swing. And Bobby says, wait a minute. I'm anti-communist. The guy says, I don't care what kind of communist you are.

Scheer: And there's this flood of water coming down the steps and people are slipping and sliding and hurting themselves, aside from the police brutality. And there's absolute mayhem. So then my memory is we kind of went into triage there, trying to get help to people who were bleeding or hurting in different ways. And that became the news story. And what I can tell you, categorically, is we did not create it.

Zeitlin: It was a disaster for the students, but symbolically, it became a rallying point. Because students would show up at other demonstrations, or rallies, that we were organizing who didn't know a damn thing about HUAC, but now identified with fellow students because they couldn't believe this is America and students are getting beat up over the head by policemen.

Scheer: The HUAC demonstration was a very big part of the development of the Bay Area. The connection of all these movements, the peace movement, the Civil Rights Movement, it was also the HUAC's moment was over.

Cuba

Zeitlin: He took off for Cuba almost immediately after the revolutionaries came to power, sometime in 1960, when it was still easy to go there.

Scheer: Cuba, the first couple of years of the Cuban revolution, the beats, believe it or not, were playing a role. That's why Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote his Thousand Fearful Words for Fidel. And they had a publication called Lunes in the official Communist Party Evolucion newspaper. The people running that Monday edition, they all thought the beats were kind of their role model, not Karl Marx. And they printed Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, and all these people.
Zeitlin: And he came back, he said, Zeitlin, it's amazing what's going on down there. This is a genuine revolution. We got to write about it. At the time, we were making speeches, and this is no exaggeration, OK. I would speak not as long as Fidel, but sometimes three or four hours. And the classes would change, so each hour, there was new masses to agitate. And eventually, there were really thousands-- I kid you not, there were thousands of students at the plaza, and then Bob would take over.

So we were like the Bobbsey Twins. I mean, we were agitators and pamphleteers and speech makers. And Ferlinghetti came up after one of our speeches, and he said, I'd like you guys to write a book for me. OK, I really like the way you guys talk and I would like you to write a book for me for City Lights books. I'd be glad to publish it. But you've got to get it to me while everything is still in the air.

So we wrote this book and handed him the manuscript. And he had this look on his face, how is he going to tell these guys? This is not the book I expected you to write. It has footnotes and it has an appendix with tables. What were you thinking? I wanted a broadside, like you guys talk. So we were so upset. And I don't know how we got in touch with Barney Rosset at Grove Books, who, at the time, was publishing the kinds of books that were banned. And he published the book.

Scheer: Cuba: Tragedy in Our Hemisphere was the Grove Press version. And so at the end of this whole thing-- and here I had a book and I was very proud of it-- it was a big deal. We were both graduate students, and I just want Maurice to get a lot of credit for it because I learned a lot from him.

In my case, I perished publishing, because I had a fellowship at the Center for Chinese Studies, and we had some real harsh Cold War hawks who were on the board of the Center for China Study, which was basically a part of a CIA front. And they engineered the yanking of my money, that I would not be a fellow.

Zeitlin: Even then, it was clear that Bob had a reporter's flair, that he was a journalist.

Scheer: I think the thesis of our book was correct, and I think it's the connection with the Vietnam Project, which came, for me, right after, which is whatever you think of these communist governments around the world. They were not mere extensions of the Soviet Union.

**Learning – The Main Thing Going**

Lear: How did you happen to come down on the side of the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence?

Scheer: It was a very simple choice. At City College, I was studying engineering, because that was what I was good at and I could make a living. And I went down to sit in a class and I ended up taking called Basic Issues of American Democracy. Everything was an issue, everything. What
does free speech mean? What is the Fourth Amendment? What does any of this mean? What are the values on both sides? And it was basically a debate. What is this constitutional about? Basic issues of American democracy. We talked about segregation. We talked about war and peace. Talked about everything. And I thought, wow.

Lear: And you knew what side you were on going in.

Scheer: No. I liked the fact that there were issues. Whether it was about McCarthyism, whether it was about the Korean War, it was all up for grabs, and you could get a different piece of it. And then I discovered the 42nd Street Library, the City College Library. And I could go down there and I could come back a few days later and know more than my professor did about it, and try to persuade him. And I would say that learning, as an activity, as a sport, as a source of joy became the main thing going.

Ferlinghetti: He was a graduate student in Berkeley. I told Bob, leave Berkeley and come to the reality of North Beach. He worked at this store about three or four years, I think.

Scheer: At City Lights, it was a great bookstore. People who have never seen City Lights, it's still there. My job was to open the store at 10 o'clock. I'd open up all the new magazines coming in. I'd open up the books that came in. And they'd be all around me on the counter. I could be there, like I say, two hours earlier. I had to sweep the place from the night before and clean it up. And then, very often, I closed the place. And I got a hell of an education there and that's how I got interested in Vietnam.

I opened up a magazine, China Quarterly, and I opened up a French publication, Nouvel Observateur. And these people were writing about the stupidity that the Americans were following in Vietnam and not learning the lessons from the French.

Then I went over to Berkeley to check on Vietnam. And what happened was I found, one day, a packet of papers. Nobody had opened this up. There was some dust on it, a ribbon around it. So I blew off the dust and opened this up. This was all about how Michigan State Police Project had trained the police in Vietnam and Saigon. And Stanley Sheinbaum, who had been the co-director of the Michigan State Project, by that time, he was a source of mine in doing this research. He had been used to be cover for the CIA project. And it had to do with torture. It had to do with the secret police. Had to do with all of this, all by way of shoring up Ngo Dinh Diem, the guy that the US had been picked to be the George Washington of South Vietnam when it decided it was going to not honor the Geneva Accords and not have elections and that Ho Chi Minh would have won those elections.

Paul Krassner, who was editing a magazine called The Realist magazine. I said, I can write something about this. And he said, that's good. I said, I should go to Vietnam. He said, where's that, or something. He didn't know. It was pretty early on. I said, well, for $1,467.36 I can get this ticket right now this afternoon, round trip ticket, and I can go and pursue these stories that I'm interested in. And bless him, he had just made a bunch of money off his Fuck Communism
posters. And he wrote a check out and I go and got the ticket, I think, that afternoon and I went to Vietnam. What happened was I wrote this pamphlet and the pamphlet took off.

Zacchino: One of the first things Bob ever wrote was a pamphlet called How the US Got Involved in Vietnam. And it sold over a million copies and it was hugely influential. And people still come up to us and say, you got me to change my opinion of the Vietnam War. You got me to come out against the Vietnam War.

Ellsberg: I read that and felt, if I'd read this in '64 or '65, I would never have gone to Vietnam. Wasn't just that I thought it was a loser, I would no longer have seen it as a legitimate struggle for us to be in. It was clear from the real history of Vietnam, and Bob was better at that, his account was better, as an account, than was available from almost anyone else at that point of the American involvement. It was clear that what we had here was a neocolonial, an imperial, involvement, where we were governing the place through our proxies, basically, which meant that it had no legitimacy, from an American point of view, as I saw it.

Scheer: Thousands of young men in this district are being asked to kill in Vietnam and possibly be killed. They know next to nothing about the history or culture of Vietnam. They've been continuously lied to by their administration. The news about Vietnam has been continuously manipulated. The American position of Vietnam has been continuously distorted by the administration. This campaign is aimed at opposing the war. It is my position that the United States should never have become involved in Vietnam, should never have stayed in Vietnam, and should now get out.

I ran for Congress against the Democratic candidate, Jeffery Cohelan, who was supposed to be a liberal guy, but he was supporting Johnson and war, and that was his whole defense. Scheer doesn't know what he's talking about. I've been at these briefings. I know what the communists are up to. I know what's going on in Vietnam. And it was a big lie because it was all based on the idea of a monolithic communist movement, and the Vietnamese were just part of an international communist conspiracy. And that was garbage and the government knew it was garbage.

Weills: And there was a group of radical, or liberal, professors at Berkeley called the Faculty Peace Committee. So they met with Bobby and I and they asked him if he would consider running for Congress, because Bobby was such a good speaker and was so deeply involved in the history of Vietnam, the knowledge that he had. But when he ran for Congress, we were trying to exercise every tactical stratagem we could to stop the war in Vietnam. We could be stopping two trains. We could be getting arrested in some demonstration. And we could be doing all of the above at the same time.

Scheer: I think we're making this demonstration today because we want to confront the citizens of this community with the enormity of this crime, to bring the reality about war home to them. And this is, in fact, our war, all of our wars, whether we are against it, whether we parade against it, whether we're for it, it is a war waged in our name. And as one who has had to travel through
villages in both South Vietnam and Cambodia, which were bombed out by American bombs, and
confront the people in those villages, whose parents, whose sons, whose sisters died as a result
of our bombing, I can tell you, they held me accountable as much as they would hold someone
who supports the war accountable. Because I was an American, I look like an American, it was
my government.

Weills: There were some friendships that broke up over Bobby running for Congress. So he did
get kind of the ultra left-- I won't even call it that. But there was a part of the left that was harshly
critical because he was in that arena running for Congress. But I don't think he and I felt-- I mean,
we've always felt like this is just another tactic to try and stop the war.

Scheer: I knew something then that I learned painfully while I ran for office, that whatever your
intentions, you're going to give the same speech seven times a day. You're going to look for the
applause lines. You're going to simplify it a bit. And I started to not like myself very much doing
that.

Weills: It's interesting. Bobby is probably one of the best speakers in my whole life, I mean, to
this date. But in my whole life with him, he would worry, worry every speech. Like, he'd sit in the
bathtub for hours, trying just to, I guess, get himself ready. But he was never comfortable, like
glib.

Waaserman: In 1966, I vividly remember when Scheer ran for Congress on a two-pronged
platform to end poverty in Oakland and end the war in Vietnam. And I was a 14-year-old Nervous
Nellie for Scheer, as the slogan had it. That was the phrase that was used by the Johnson
administration. And I think Johnson himself, or at least his speechwriters, to caricature and
castigate those who questioned the efficacy and legitimacy of American intervention in Vietnam.
And I still have campaign buttons. It was then that I met, in passing, his 24-year-old campaign
manager, the inimitable Alice Waters.

Waters: I ended up driving him to some of the engagements that he had around Berkeley and
other places. And I would sit in the audience, if you will, and I could have heard it over and over
again. I did hear it over and over again. But it just became my thinking about the poor. And when
he lost, I didn't want to have anything to do with politics again. I always tell him the story that
when he lost, I opened Chez Panisse.

Scheer: We stepped on a lot of toes in this area in the last five months. I don't sound like the
ordinary candidate. I don't look like the ordinary candidate. And in
fact, that 29,000 people were
willing to vote for me, make that commitment, indicates a very serious commitment to a new
style of politics. I came, what I say, is dangerously close to winning.

Wasserman: Scheer narrowly lost the election, garnering something on the order of 45% of the
vote. But it was, as you know, regarded as a bellwether election and it paved the way for Ronald
Dellums victory two years later.
Dellums: So one night, I hear this candidate running for Congress, Bob Scheer, this incredibly articulate guy, who was speaking with such clarity and such integrity. I came back to my guys and I said, man, I just met a bad white dude. And they said, really? I said, yeah, you got to hear this guy.

Ramparts Magazine

Scheer: Mind you, I'm still running a magazine, basically running it because I'm the managing editor by that point. I know people are pissed off at the magazine. What the fuck are you running for Congress for? You're supposed to running a magazine, an international magazine. People are reading us all over the world and you're putzing around in Oakland.

I do think Ramparts was gangbusters. It was fucking gangbusters. And the whole thing was the people we were taking on. We were that breath of fresh air. It's what Berkeley was. It was what the free speech movement was. Well, Ramparts was another manifestation, but in the world of journalism. And for that, I have to really give Hinckle a lot of credit. We were always journalists and he was going to transform journalism.

Richardson: Where Ramparts really gets lift off is when Warren recruits Bob Scheer. So Bob Scheer brings that kind of political analysis.

Weills: Warren is really smart, too. And he was not politically radical, or ideologically radical, but he was a troublemaker, a muckraker. And that's the part that he really loved, and that's why we ended up, or magazine ended up, exposing the CIA, because he was a risk taker. And so here we have Bob, who's more of the intellectual leftist, has more of this sort of philosophical, political history of the left, socialism, communism. And here's Warren, who is like, yeah, let's go blow it up. Take him on. Fearless. So that's one thing I loved about Warren.

Wasserman: The two of them together were really a dynamic duo.

Scheer: I go to work at Ramparts at start of '63, '64. but one thing I do is put the magazine squarely on the side of raising questions about this Vietnam War thing.

Griffin: But the women, we were in these lowly jobs, which had lower pay, and we were expected to work all night to put the magazine to bed. That's what you do in journalism. And so we did that. But the guys would go out to Vanessa's and put it on the credit card for the magazine. And we had to pay for our own. So I organized the women and we protested and we got our meals paid for, too.

I mean, we all loved being there. I learned a tremendous amount. And it was very exciting because we were the only publication, basically, in the United States challenging the Vietnam War in the beginning, challenging all kinds of things. There was amazing work going on-- Gene Marine and David Welch and Sol Stern, and, of course, Bob.
Ehrlich: You have the traditional liberal magazines, like The Nation and The New Republic. But they didn't have anywhere near the impact that Ramparts did.

Richardson: So what Ramparts did was they said, let's put some resources into this. Let's make it look like Time Magazine. Let's go to stories that the other publications won't touch on Vietnam, on the CIA, on the FBI, on the Black Panthers. And if we do it in a certain way, The New York Times is going to have to pick it up.

Ehrlich: The expose about the NSA being used by the CIA, that was a huge story. The NSA was the National Student Association. It was, at that time, the largest student group. But the fact that the CIA was directly involved in funding and influencing the NSA was an eye-opener for a lot of people.

Interviewer: Mr. Hinckle, when did Ramparts first get information regarding CIA activities and student groups that started your investigation?

Hinckle: Approximately two months ago, we had our first information on the story. And we've had a team of about 11 reporters and investigators working on it full-time ever since.

Fonda: I had been living in France. I was married to a Frenchman. And I came home, and as I walked out of the airport, there was a magazine stand, and it had Ramparts magazine there. And on the cover was a Native American woman named LaNada Means. She was against a whitewashed wall, where it was written in red letters "better red than dead." And I bought it and I read it and it changed my life. It was an article by Peter Collier, who was then a progressive person, about the history of what white European settlers had done to the indigenous people that lived here that, I am ashamed to say, I was not fully aware of. And it just rocked me and turned me into an activist. I went to Alcatraz. It used the occupation of Alcatraz, the Native American occupation of the Island of Alcatraz, to go back and tell the whole history. And that magazine was edited by Robert Scheer.

TV Announcer: Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.

Williams: My name is C. Dickerman Williams and I shall act as chairman of this discussion between Mr. Buckley and Mr. Scheer. The subject is, is Ramparts anti-American? Mr. Scheer, will you answer Mr. Buckley's question?

Scheer: Well, before I answer his question, let me just state, my only problem with anti-Americanism is that I don't suspect that your concept of what the core of being an American and mine would be the same. If you could come up with such a very simple and clear definition of what an American is, then I'm willing to talk about anti-Americanism. If you want, for purposes of rhetoric, I'm perfectly willing to use the term. I find your support of the government of South Africa and Rhodesia and the Dominican Republic and the Diem regime to be anti-American, but I'm also willing to concede that we can have a serious disagreement about what Americanism is.
Buckley: Correct, correct. I note and remark your digression and return, if you don't mind, to the subject of discussion.

Scheer: Well, why is that a digression? I don't see it as a digression. Unless you're willing to define the term anti-American, we're going to sit here for an hour, piddling around this point.

Buckley: Because I'm not talking about South Africa. I'm talking about America.

Scheer: No, but if you're not willing to define what you mean by that term, it doesn't seem to me you should use it. Why wait until 20 minutes from now to define it?

Buckley: I'm willing to define it, but I'm rather enjoying your embarrassment.

Scheer: I don't feel the least bit embarrassed.

Buckley: You look it. You sound it.

Scheer: I would rather talk about your substantive issues. I might add, I also find his contempt for freedom in support of the McCarthy Committee, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and his own red-baiting and his own attacks, and anyone who dissents in this society-- in effect, his efforts to make a person who is a communist to become a non-person, in much the same way as the Soviet Union does--

Buckley: Wait, wait, wait. Don't go on and on and on and on.

Cambodia

Scheer: What is the piece of writing that I'm proudest of? It's probably my letter from Phnom Penh. I'm not saying it's the most important, but I was there in Phnom Penh for a conference of Indochinese people. And everyone was there. The Viet Cong were there and North Vietnamese and Prince Sihanouk, the head of Cambodia, address this conference. But I was the only American journalist there. I wrote a piece. It was basically, leave it alone. I wrote this piece really more to the left than anyone else. I said, let it be. Let them make their own history. Let them figure it out. And then I went back there next year with Stanley Sheinbaum and my wife, Anne.

Weills: But I think, for Bobby and I, we fell in love with Cambodia. Everything was lush, so you could live off the land. And it was a very underdeveloped country, extraordinarily so, but there was a peacefulness and a spirituality. And then to see what the US did. The bombing of Cambodia was just-- and, in fact, that's propelled the Khmer Rouge to power. And I know that. I mean, I've studied it. And it's just, again, part of the empire and all the horrors we've committed as an empire. But I think for Bobby and I, and for a lot of our generation, I mean, the relationship we have with Vietnam and Cambodia was extremely deep.
Richardson: Dr. King was having lunch at the airport with a friend and he was flipping through some magazines. And he happened to see a Ramparts magazine. And there was a photo essay called "The Children of Vietnam." And it showed some of the effects of the US war on the Vietnamese, especially the toll that it took on Vietnamese children.

Griffin: Ramparts was famous for having run these photographs of napalm children, these terrible wounds that they had, and their faces burned off, practically off. And the question was, do we run these photographs, because they were so gruesome? Is that sensationalist to run something like this? This is the kind of thing you see and you don't sleep that night. It was horrific. And to think that our government was doing this.

Richardson: It was very hard-hitting. And he sort of pushed his food away. And he said, I don't think I'm going to be hungry until we do something about this situation. His advisors told him, don't come out against our policy in Vietnam. And Dr. King said, no. And he later said, as soon as I saw that issue of Ramparts magazine, I knew that I had to come out and oppose our policy in Vietnam. And that was a kind of turning point for him. And you don't get a lot of stories like that. But Ramparts could have that kind of impact.

Scheer: There were people the Civil Rights Movement, get in your lane. Martin, you've got to stay in your lane. And then there were whites saying, you got to stay in your lane. Well, The New York Times editorial, Stay in Your Lane. And they didn't even give him the courtesy of a serious news account of his speech. And when I listened to the speech and I read it, I said, wow. I said, an incredible manifesto. I mean, it's just blazing out there. And it was like a big deal to get a text of it so we could publish it in Ramparts. Well, that's one of the reasons why the FBI and the CIA and everybody came after us, when you look at all the documents around that have been revealed. They went after us. He had two advisors, one black guy and one Jewish guy, who was supposed to have once been communist. Red-baiting was the norm.

What they did to Martin Luther King, that was the deep state. That was the FBI, which liberals are now celebrating. But it was the FBI that tried to kill King. They are the ones who made the phony documents. They're the ones who wanted to get him to commit suicide.

We were followed all the time by both the CIA and the FBI. And by the way, as a personal note, I was exonerated by J. Edgar Hoover. There is something called a Scheer file in 1972. And the big fight developed between the CIA and the FBI about whether I was an agent of some foreign government. And they couldn't find any government, because as soon as they settled on one, I would denounced it. And so the FBI agents in San Francisco said, Scheer's just a good time Charlie. He just wants to find girls, or something. And he's denounced in every single group that we've infiltrated. And so finally, J. Edgar Hoover came back from Washington. They said, we'll plant some drugs on him. And the guys in San Francisco had the wisdom to say, are you kidding? We'll make him a national hero. And so there is actually correspondence. I finally got, from the Freedom of Information, where J. Edgar Hoover tells the FBI agents in San Francisco that he's closing the Scheer case, closing my file because he's not an enemy agent. And the CIA accused Hoover of betraying the security of the country.
Zacchino: The thing he's most proud of with Ramparts, I think he would tell you, is getting Martin Luther King to come out against the war in Vietnam. What's interesting about that, from a news media point of view, is that the news media did not grasp the importance of these two national movements joining together, the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement joining together like that.

Scheer: We burned our draft cards. We took our own draft cards, burned them, and that was the cover, four top editors. So we were hauled before a federal grand jury in New York because of that. In San Francisco, I was hauled before another grand jury over the Panthers.

Most people view the mass arrests as being peaceful and that people went into the buses in a peaceful way. But in fact, as far as the treatment of the prisoners in Santa Rita, was most brutal that's taken place in the northern United States, as far as I know. Yeah, I was arrested accidentally, even though I had a press pass, and found myself on the bus. And when we got to Santa Rita, we piled out of the bus and they began hitting us. And they instructed everyone who had been arrested yesterday to lie down on some gravel outside in this courtyard. It was very cold, and if we moved, if you moved your feet or anything, that would hit you. And they would ask us political questions. If we gave the wrong answers, we'd be hit or we'd have to crawl around on our knees.

Interviewer: Crawl, literally?

Scheer: Yes. One of the medical volunteers was in our barrack this morning and he wouldn't give the right answer to a question about who started this whole fracas, and they just pulled him right out and started beating him very badly and he was bleeding.

**Six Day War**

Weills: And so Ramparts sends Bobby to the Middle East to go. He went to Israel, Palestine, Egypt. And he ended up writing a series of articles, which were extremely fair and balanced.

Scheer: One thing that was very clear to me was the Palestinians were the victims from all sides. So yes, I wrote very much out of a feeling of concern for the Palestinians. That's how I was raised as a Jew, was to have some universal sense of values.

Richardson: I think, if you go back and look at those articles, I think they hold up pretty well. But a lot of people were upset by them, including some of the investors.

Weills: Marty Peretz, he basically pulled all the money out of Ramparts. And then other people, I think maybe they felt it tilted to be too pro-Arab. So anyway, a lot of money went down the drain.
Richardson: But Ramparts was able to reorganize and relaunch without Warren, and Bob was in charge. But in short order, Peter Collier and David Horowitz led a kind of insurrection, and they actually deposed Bob.

Scheer: Well, it's interesting about David Horowitz. First of all, I met David when I was in graduate school Berkeley. And we got friendly and we were both on the left. I brought him back from London to be at Ramparts. And David, being the wily Trotskyist began plotting my overthrow as the editor. The critical opportunity for him was when I went off to see Eldridge in Algeria. Horowitz had the wonderful opportunity to organize the staff and to argue that I was being excessively paid and leading a bourgeois life. And it was funny because later in life he would attack me from the right. Then he was attacking me from the left.

Richardson: I think he was a little bitter about it. I think he felt betrayed because he had recruited these people. But he had to reinvent himself.

Christopher Scheer: He had to try to figure out, how can I still be radical in my thinking and keep the mainstream audience? And Ramparts was the exception to the rule, in that Ramparts had reached a pretty huge audience without giving up its soul. But that's not the norm. So I think he started thinking, well, the way I can get a magazine, or a publisher, interested is to have these profiles, these interactions. Then that's where he develops that skill.

Wasserman: When I was in my final year as a senior at Cal, he was recovering from having been overthrown in a kind of coup at Ramparts magazine a number of years earlier. He was trying to fight his way out of being blacklisted by so many publications. And he was beginning to get some jobs again, writing for Esquire and for Playboy. He had a book contract with McGraw Hill. And he needed someone to help him with that and I was enormously flattered, came over to the house. And since then, we've been in each other's lives for the next 41 years.

Christopher Scheer: Later-- now and I'm nine years old, 1976-- Bob does the interview with Jimmy Carter, where Jimmy Carter says he has lust in his heart, which even, as a nine-year-old, I thought, what's the big deal?

Scheer: It's a biblical image. We all have lust in our heart. Lust is what the goddamn Bible-- Old Testament is certainly all about lust. And so he was giving a thoughtful answer. Instead, that became the hot item.

Christopher Scheer: This interview blows up immediately and Bob is on TV a lot. And I can remember my mom waking me up at like, 6:45 in the morning before school and saying, your dad's on Good Morning America. And I would drag my blanket out to the couch and watch my dad have one of those face-off kind of interviews.

Christopher Scheer: Bob becomes famous because of the Jimmy Carter interview. But of course, he was already famous. But to me, even as a nine-year-old, I was like, this is different. You just interviewed this guy running for president and you may have changed the whole election.

I mean, the biggest thing that my father was struggling with, at least from my view, or one of the things he was struggling with in the '70s was everybody who came out of the '60s, as a radical or leader, was fighting with the word "sellout." Everybody was a sellout. So I heard about Tom Hayden becoming a sellout when he went into mainstream politics. And that was the word everybody would use, being a sellout. So of course, if you go and take money.

Scheer: But I think the basic element in the American constitutional experiment was the right and obligation to question authority in every realm, beginning with government. And that's why the free press writers enshrined their ideas. And the big shift I've seen is we had a flowering, probably the greatest, most significant pervasive time of the flowering of that ideal in the '60s, where it spread very far into very different sectors, apart from the Civil Rights Movement, apart from the women's movement, apart from the anti-war movement. Lots of different things-- culturally, emergence of a new music, all sorts of things. Without glorifying it, without glossing over its contradictions, there has never been a better period to talk about the flowering of that kind of freedom, individual responsibility, question authority, and the signal, the slogan, of that was, don't sell out. Don't sell out.

Wasserman: At one point, we had a drink in the hotel Algonquin, famous for hosting the Algonquin round table, made famous by the contributors to the New Yorker. And we sat there, drinking steadily into the wee hours. And as the place emptied of people, suddenly our eyes fell upon a New York rat making its way across the carpet. And Scheer looked at the rat, looked up at me, and said, you know Wasserman, the rats are in the toniest places. And they're here to remind us all that the corruptions of the place cannot be banished by the conceits of how well appointed they are. And it is that sensibility that has enabled Bob to be armored against "selling out," a word or phrase you barely hear anymore.

“I am the journalist”

Scheer: When I first came to LA to work for the LA Times, and I thought, am I selling out now? What am I doing? Mass media, I'd done Ramparts, and so forth. You're one of the first people I interviewed here, and you told me something then. You said, they're always going to pressure you. Your ethics are always going to be on the line. You said, and what keeps me straight-- you had this old-fashioned typewriter. You said, see this piece of paper? No one can stop me from putting that piece of paper in there, rolling it, and typing something else. You said, you're basically a writer. Have we lost whatever moral fiber we had?

Lear: Well, you haven't. What if I suggested to you, when you were talking about looking for a hero, that you look a little more often in the mirror?
Scheer: Because I think I am not interesting. I'm sorry, OK. I am a journalist because what I write about is interesting. This world is interesting. I try to do it with feeling. I can't control my feeling. I get pissed off. I get angry. I want to write about it, OK. But I am the journalist.

Zacchino: I was asked by my metro editor if I knew Bob Scheer. So my editor said, can you go out to lunch with Bob and kind of talk up the place, because we're trying to hire him? And I said, wow. That surprised me because Bob was an alternative journalist, and at the paper, the LA Times was pretty staid. But by then, Bob was pretty well known as a national correspondent because of the Jimmy Carter interview, mostly. The LA Times decided to hire Bob to do narrative journalism for the paper.

Wasserman: I was brought along, about a year after, as his researcher. I tried to make sure that the facts were right. Scheer was always someone who had a tremendous regard, tremendous respect-- facts mattered. He labored under the tyranny of facts because, of course, he lived in fear that if he got something wrong, he would be subjected to the most vicious kind of red-baiting.

Zacchino: I started off editing all of Bob's stuff. And I remember the first story I edited, we were in our apartment and I started reading it, and there were so many spelling errors. Bob had all these stories about when he was a child, about flunking out of classes, and this and that. And then he took a test in New York. So he went to school in the Bronx. He took a test where he ended up getting like, one of the highest grades in the whole city of New York. He went from being in the dummy class to being in the genius class in one afternoon.

Scheer: So I go from the moron class to the genius class, not a word of explanation of what's going on. And by now, I have real behavioral problems because I've gone through these two years in PSA. Now I'm in high school and, yeah, I got anger issues and a lot of things. But anyway, I go to this genius class. She says, oh, in the core curriculum class, here you follow your own interests. This was like John Dewey to the extreme. You're going to totally go with your interest. And here, you can do whatever you want to. And I said, whatever I want-- a little belligerent. And I said, I want to go home. She said, oh, you can. So she made the mistake of giving me some pass to go home. Well, I didn't come back for, I don't know, six weeks, or some, two months. And the truant officer came looking and got me.

Zacchino: And it was hard for him, but he never put it together. He never realized that he had a learning difference, until our son was diagnosed.

Scheer: So I had this, yes, undiagnosed problem. The system did its best to try to convince me I was dumb, but it made me argumentative. And it's actually been the main strength I've had as a polemicist, or critic.

Zacchino: So Bob came out as being dyslexic publicly in a column he wrote for The Times. And I cannot, to this day, read that without crying, because it was so human and so painful, what he was describing, his childhood and our son, Josh.
Scheer: Yeah, go ahead, because we're going to run out of time.

One reason I'm teaching-- that's probably the main reason, actually, I got involved with teaching- - was to help kids with learning disabilities. And it's probably my greatest success, was reaching out to kids who learn a different way or have a gap.

Cowan: Bob truly loves his students, loves his class, and brings subjects to life. And he's prepared to argue every side of an issue, so that when he has a guest there, the guest may take a position that one would expect Bob to agree with, but then Bob is as ornery as he can possibly, trying to make sure that the students are exposed to the other side of that issue.

Williams: He made us think. He didn't just present ideas and say-- one, he didn't present it to say that anything is the right way to do or the wrong way to do. He just made us think about how we should be processing the information we're being fed. And so that's what's key about Bob's class. Bob is sort of the quest for the truth, I think whatever that truth may be. So he doesn't think he's always right, and that's why he'll play devil's advocate on all the sides to bring about the lively debate. I have a master's in public diplomacy specifically because of Bob Scheer.

Scheer: The LA Times had attacked me when I ran for Congress, viciously. And not just editorially, in their news section. The paper had been quite conservative, and it was Nixon's paper. And yet clearly, it was becoming a much better paper. Otis Chandler was the best publisher the paper ever had. He picked a couple of very good editors to work with, Nick Williams and then Bill Thomas, who, for my money, was the best editor around. And said, we want you to do what you do. There were only a couple of times at the LA Times where I had these moments of truth during the 17 years that I was a national reporter. And I mean, every time, it worked out the way we had promised. One time, I interviewed George Bush. It was in the '80 campaign, and it derailed his campaign because he talked about winnable nuclear war, and so forth. Well, he was livid. And so he came into the building, however, after that. Came into the building. They had him speak to the editorial board and political writers, and so forth. I was invited. And I said hello to him. I traveled with him and when he was not the most prominent candidate. So he gave his speech to the board, and one question was, do you think age will be an issue, Ronald Reagan's age? And he said, well, I'm not going to bring it up, and the 11th commandment, Republican candidate. Out of nowhere, he says, being older, do you think at Ronald Reagan's age, will he be able to withstand the pounding you get from a reporter like Robert Scheer? Everybody in the room is startled. And I say, oh, Jesus. And another question came up a few questions later like that, where he, in a gratuitous way, dragged me into it. And so as we were filing out of this room, Otis Chandler came up to me, put his arm around me. He was taller than I am. Put his arm and he says, Bob, I've known George since college. You got the right George. Don't let this get to you. Just keep doing it.

Zacchino: But Bob interviewed him. He interviewed, of course, Reagan.

Scheer: Do you think we could survive a nuclear war?
Reagan: No, because we have let them get so strong and we have let them violate the agreement.

Scheer: But let's say we got stronger than them again. Do you think we could survive a nuclear war? With the right underground shelter systems, with the right defense systems, could we survive it?

Reagan: It would be a survival of some of your people and some of your facilities that you could start again. It would not be anything that I think, in our society, we would consider acceptable. But then we have a different regard for human life than those monsters do.

Zacchino: He interviewed Nixon, too. Nixon liked something Bob had written and invited Bob to interview him.

Scheer: The biggest challenge of all was Richard Nixon, the biggest challenge from the interview point of view. And in Nixon's case, hey, my taxes have been audited by this guy. People have been following me all over the world because of this guy, and everything. I mean, I was really on the receiving end of a lot of bad stuff from Nixon. And I certainly knew other people's lives had been destroyed. And I knew a lot about Cambodia. He'd ordered the Cambodian bombing. I'd been in Cambodia beginning in 1963, '64. I had loved Cambodia. I know the damage. Terrible, genocide, and everything.

Zacchino: He would pick subjects that he just thought were interesting and weren't being covered right, weren't being covered at all, and then he would bring light to them.

"The good humor truck circles aimlessly through silent blocks of burned out buildings, hunting the occasional wave still playing in the rubble, who might yet desire a popsicle. This time, there is no sign of life and the ice cream truck departs with a last ring of its merry chimes, leaving a still life of the South Bronx warscape dotted by garbage lakes, dunes of litter, and beached hulks of abandoned cars. The streets are dead, as if locust had descended and slurped up the ringalevio and stickball games, the philosophers of the benches, the checker kings, and the loud music boys, the girls with fishnet stockings and stiletto heels, and the young studs with bodies, some said were good for nothing but dancing. Gone the wild, chaotic, noisy, cosmopolitan life of a borough that, for decades, belched up life continuously as its very mission."

Bob became very interested in AIDS, covering AIDS, because nobody was covering AIDS. Reagan, in fact, did very little to recognize AIDS as a crisis. I remember, I came home one night from work. His mother lived with us. And I said, Ida, I said, you look sad. What's wrong? And she said, I'm so depressed. I'm reading this book. It's so depressing. I'm reading this book. It's so depressing.

And I said, what are you reading? And she said, it's this book about a disease called AIDS. And I said Ida, I said, you're 82 or something. I said, you don't have to read a book like that about AIDS. And she said, everybody should read this book. And it's where Bob gets a lot of who he is, is from this woman. Anyway, but Bob wrote about AIDS before anybody in the country was writing about
AIDS. He did a whole series on AIDS. He did a series on one of his early stories, the television news industry, when TV news was getting kind of really toward entertainment more than news.

Cowan: That was a wonderful series that he did. At that time, I was a lawyer specializing in communications law. And Bob's series won the Pulitzer from the jury unanimously, but the overall Pulitzer committee did not allow him to get the award that year.

Zacchino: So the board overturned it and gave it to another reporter from the LA Times for a series on dam safety.

Cowan: It might have been related to the fact that he had given an interview in More magazine, which was then kind of a Columbia Journalism Review type magazine, in which he advocated guerrilla journalism. And some people thought that, somehow, that was suggesting a type of journalism that they couldn't embrace.

Zacchino: Bob was nominated for 11 Pulitzers in 10 years.

Left, Right & Center


Huffington: I feel that what made this show work is that these were our views. We didn't really have to prepare for it. Both Bob and I had a syndicated column. Matt Miller wrote a lot himself. So it's always much easier to be on radio and express your views when you're also a writer, because when you write, you figure out your views in a deeper way.

Zacchino: She was on the right in the beginning. He was on the left. And then she started moving over. So they had to kind of say she was in the center and they had to get another person on the right.

Huffington: When I started, I was on the right and then I moved in a position that I describe as beyond left and right. At the time, I was a kind of extinct species of Republican. I was pro-choice, pro-gay rights, pro-gun control. So where we differed was on my understanding, at the time, of the role of government. I thought the private sector would step up to the plate and address all the social problems we're dealing with. And gradually, and to a large extent through my conversations with Bob, I realized that would never happen, that we actually needed the raw power of government appropriations to be able to address all the problems we are facing.

Zacchino: She has spoken in Bob's class, and she said it was your professor who influenced me. He made it all sound so sensible, what he was saying and writing.

Huffington: So Bob was both a great friend and an amazing mentor.
Wasserman: Scheer is terrific on the stump, passionate. And one of the things about Bob that is really important is that he has perceived, all his life, as if the stakes were really high, as if serious things actually matter.

Scheer: The peace movement in this country started, I remember it very clearly, in 1963 when Madam Nhu came to the United States, Diem's sister-in-law, to rally support. The Buddhist monks, as I said, were burning themselves. There was struggle in the streets of Saigon, all right. At that time, the United States had maybe 20,000 troops in Vietnam. We called them advisors. We've been lied to by the Kennedy administration. We were told they were there to do flood assistance, flood relief work--at that time, the student protests, the protesters in general, had been listened to. There would not have been a Vietnam War. There would not have been Vietnam involvement. There would not have been a threat to our pride, saving face, challenging patriotism, betraying the troops, undermining morale, dividing the country. All of the charges that have been leveled against the anti-war movement--never. None of that would have made any sense at all, because the anti-war movement started at a time when American face was not particularly involved, when we did not have this strategic interest, when we did not have a large number of troops, and when we could have easily withdrawn from Vietnam. And so this big lie of the story is, one, that this war was somehow necessary for some strategic purpose, which was never believed. And secondly, that the anti-war movement lengthened the war, when the anti-war movement tried to stop this war from the beginning when it would have been easy to stop.

I liked David Halberstam, personally. I liked him. At the time, I did not think that he wrote the best book about Vietnam. But he certainly had the best title of any book about American politics, The Best and the Brightest. That is the beginning of wisdom about the American condition. The great damage in our society comes from The Best and the Brightest.

McNamara: I had two fears during my years as Secretary of Defense. One fear, and I expressed it to President Johnson in December 1965, was that we couldn't win the war militarily. I said to him at that time, and I quote it in the book, there's only a one in three chance or, at best, a one in two chance, to win militarily. He said, are you saying we can't win military? I said, yes. However, the second fear was that if we pulled out of Vietnam, it would lead to what Eisenhower predicted in 1954, the fall of the dominoes. In other words, the fear that if we didn't stand firm, the Communists would take control of Southeast Asia, all of Asia, and strengthen their position against the West, in Europe and the US.

I think the book is a very important one. And I think it's important because it shows how little knowledge, the abysmal ignorance, that was present in the government at that time, that it shows us that The Best and the Brightest did not read and did not think very clearly. Makes one suspicious of any government official, and I think should lead the citizens to question what they're told is the official truth.

First of all, there were senators, Gruening and Morse and Church, who were saying all these things that McNamara now says he didn't know, that Ho Chi Minh was an Asian tito, that there
was a Sino-Soviet dispute. We installed Diem in power-- this autocrat, who McNamara says he detested as an autocrat, and later we had killed.

Scheer: But I don't find any sense of contrition in this book. I think it's a bit cold-blooded in its rhetoric. There's no real sense of the lives that were lost, the damage to this country, the people, the American military who were killed or kept prisoner, the Vietnamese who died. What we have, I think, is someone dissembling and trying to put the best spin on what is, really, an atrocious complicity.

**Leaving the LA Times**

Wasserman: But there was, in Bob, a deliberate renunciation of the East Coast, a deliberate renunciation of the cozy suffocations of the Washington, New York, Boston nexus, and a deliberate embrace of a kind of freewheeling West Coast bohemianism. The heady bohemianism of Ferlinghetti's San Francisco, and of Berkeley, in those days, I think, was atonic to him. I think it hurt him, with respect to a national reputation. Despite the fact that he was a columnist for the Los Angeles Times, and despite the fact that those columns would, from time to time, get picked up, as I say, geography is fate. And the Los Angeles Times, for all its good reporting, was still regarded by most of the rest of the country as provincial.

Scheer: But the bottom line at the LA Times was they're going to hire me because I add something to their mix, which, if they're a commercial enterprise, makes them commercially more viable, if they need some kind of balance, for whatever reason. And then when they don't need that, they fire you. Or if there's too much of that, they fire you, right? I mean, that's what it's all about, because their main concern is not necessarily journalism, or truth, or anything else. It's some kind of mix that they're marketing.

Goodman: Last week, The Los Angeles Times announced it's firing long-time columnist, Robert Scheer. He's been at the times for 30 years. He was one of the most progressive voices there. In recent years, his columns took on the Bush administration and its justifications for the invasion of Iraq. In a posting at The Huffington Post blog he wrote, quote, "The publisher, Jeff Johnson, who's offered not a word of explanation to me, has privately told people he hated every word I wrote. I assume mostly refers to my exposing the lies used by President Bush to justify the invasion."

Peter Scheer: Bob's whole thing with work has always been you have to have more than one job so you can tell people to fuck off if they push you. You need to be independent and able to walk away. And the LA Times really tested that for him because it was hard for him to just walk away from that. He really valued having that audience in this city. He had his political column once a week and he had his local column, which, at one point, was, I think, twice a week. And he became a voice and a personality on the west side of LA and got a lot out of that. So that went away, and then he lost his column. I think he was pretty devastated. He felt like that was his home. He left his freelance career, for the most part, to go to the LA Times. He met his wife, my mom, at the LA Times.
Wasserman: I think it's a shabby business, that the LA Times let Bob go when he came under some suspicion of writing obsessively about our blunders in Iraq.

Scheer: Take the recent post 9/11 experience. We wouldn't have gone into Iraq, this place we've made-- who ever thought we could make Saddam Hussein look good? We're making Assad look good. We're making Gathafi look good. We can make any monster in the world look good by our efforts to bring democracy. We bring chaos. We bring madness. It's absolutely insane, thoughtless. And we have this ability. Why? Because we don't have an informed public. You could lie to the public about the basic two reasons for going into Iraq. There were no weapons of mass destruction. You knew it in real time, but you lied. And secondly, you lied about Saddam Hussein's connection with al-Qaeda. It was the one place in the Mid East where al-Qaeda could not operate. It's an absolute lie. And yet, you make this intervention.

Peter Scheer: And the thing I think is so frustrating for him is there's no price for being right after the fact. On KCRW, on Left, Right & Center, which was a very popular show that lots of people listened to, so people will know for, really, years before and during the Iraq war, Bob was far outnumbered on the panel by people who thought it was either a very good idea to invade Iraq, or it was going swimmingly, or it could very easily go much better, if only we would do x, y, and z. And obviously, Bob was 100% right about the Iraq war. And so what? There's no prize for that. And in fact, in addition to his career, Bob has had to pay a price, I think, with his friendships, because a lot of people that go way back and there's mutual love there, I think, had a really hard time dealing with some of his issues. I think people don't realize Bob is not a Democrat. He's not a liberal. He's a person who has a view of the world that's informed by his experience growing up in poverty during the end of the Depression and World War II and through the '60s and the Civil Rights Movement. And that is where his values come from, and he's not loyal to a movement or a party. He really has a basic test of human decency, and that's more important to him. He doesn't see it as his job to help someone become president, certainly. And no journalist should.

Scheer: I come from a tradition on the left where getting it right-- and I don't mean in some doctrinaire sense-- what is critical to your set of values. I.F. Stone would go to hearings and report on him. He'd get the congressional record. He'd get the committee reports and documents and read them with his glasses up by his nose. And he did that kind of work and then he'd throw it back at them. And that's where I learned journalism, from the journalists that I really admired. Izzy was not writing his columns because it was going to make him a celebrity, or something. He was doing it because he was trying to pursue the truth.

Boyarsky: Izzy Stone did not accept at face value what the administration said, or the other reporters, the Washington establishment reporters, said. But he would just dig into everything and show that they were wrong. See, that's what Bob has. That's why Bob is, to me, an inspirational editor. And he's able to take a reporter, like me, and inspire me to do the same, to dig, dig, dig, like the name of the site says, truthdig.
Kaufman: truthdig.com, we really want to carry on and do investigative journalism. We landed on the idea of doing a website and we came up together, collaboratively, with the idea of truthdig. And it was in the works and we had kind of a prototype. And we were going to launch the beta version, but in fact, when he was fired from the Los Angeles Times for his national column and had so much public support, it propelled us to just go ahead and launch and take advantage of the goodwill and continue his voice.

Scheer: We call it truthdig because we think that you can get to a truth, that the truth matters because lives are sacrificed, bad policies are followed, and so forth. We're also making the assumption that, ultimately, a public and a democratic society will value the truth, will find ways to support it.

Peter Scheer: A lot of what he would do is just pick up the phone and say, get this up on the website. This thing is happening. People need to be talking about it. Why aren't we writing more about Gaza, for example, the many times that Israel bombed Gaza, or shot at people from across the border, or it was just generally in the news. He'd say, this is a taboo subject, but people aren't talking about it. It's crazy what's happening. We should be talking about it. And he would call us up and he would say, I've got this writer who's going to write about this, or go find a writer who can write about this, or I'm going to write about this. And he would force it up on the site, even if we were to say, oh, we already have a schedule and we can't really fit that in right now. He really is a toughie at truthdig. He's the boss and he really will insist that things go up that people should be talking about.

Scheer: First, really great story was one I'm very proud of. It concerns the deaths of Pat Tillman, a professional football player. He and his brother, Kevin, during the Rangers, the idea of ordinary people should not have to bear the price of war. Even athletes, Kevin, was a baseball player, a Cleveland Indian system. And they went to Afghanistan and Pat was killed in an incident that was first lied about, as if it was heroic. He was heroic, but that's not the way he died. He died because American troops. And then a lot of suspicion about that, which I have to this day. I had written a column about it. My wife ended up writing a book. Kevin Tillman, Pat's brother, wrote a piece about the meaning of Pat's death and the reaction to it.

Kaufman: When that came out, you had Wolf Blitzer walking over to his computer and saying, this major story just broke on this little website, truthdig. And actually, on CNN, showed an image of the truthdig website. And you had the AP doing several stories on it. It was The Washington Post's biggest story, The New York Times then did a story. And it just went viral.

Scheer: And it took us off the charts. It established truthdig. We've won six Webbys, an internet award, where we've been the best political website.

Wall Street, what fucking thieves.
Boyarsky: You also have to divorce, in his speeches that he makes, from the kind of journalism that he does. Like his work on the banks, digging into the whole financial picture and run up to the recession and who profited from that, was really pioneering stuff. I mean, other people would do it. He wasn't the only one. Other people were doing it. But that kind of journalism, and he was a leader in that, set the stage for critical thinking of the bailout, and really, was the intellectual background of the Sanders campaign.

**Journalism and the Internet**

Scheer: The LA Times used to be called the Velvet Coffin. We actually flew first class. We actually stayed at good hotels. But the economy of that couldn't even been sustained without the internet. Already, the profit margins were declining. The internet came in and just unmasked the whole thing, OK. Online journalism is not paying for anyone. That's why I wrote this whole book, They Know Everything About You. One of the things in that book is that the destruction of print did not create a self-sustaining operational model to take its place. Because advertising on the internet is tiny compared to the cost, and that is because the advertisers don't have to go to you. They don't have to go to The New York Times. They can pick up your readers by data mining.

I think the most disturbing thing is that our CIA could go in and do data mining. Government leaks become more important. If information is more difficult to obtain because it's costly by news organizations and they can't send reporters out to cover the war, the government will always be more than willing to give you information. So there's that whole element, a rising power of governments all over the world, their ability to control news, and a lack of independent alternative organizations. I do a podcast now for KCRW. I have to help raise the money for it.

There's still the idea, get behind public radio and television.

Lloyd: Listen, we should be able to find the ability to support a strong, robust public media that's not just television or radio, but it's also the internet, that people can access, that they can learn on, that they can participate in.

Scheer: Everybody talks about the internet being so irresponsible because anybody can put something out. Well, that's what the great pamphleteering tradition in America was all about. If you could find somebody to print on their letter press your Rights of Man, your document, you could find a big audience. This is how our Declaration of Independence got circulated. The press that's enshrined in our Constitution, our First Amendment, free press, was often a scurrilous press. It was made up of town criers and dissidents and pamphleteers.

Robert Scheer: "Fake news" is a term that is dangerous because it pulls in a lot of different disparate things. In the truest sense, it's people who are paying to have literal fake news on literally fake news websites, created and then promoted on Facebook for various means, whether it's financial gain or political gain. And then there are sites, like truthdig, that have a very deliberate point of view. I think it's important for people to value journalism and resist genuine
fake news, but it also has been used as a way of dismissing progressive media outlets, and conservative media outlets.

Scheer: I would say the most overwhelming feeling I had about journalism in America, and I have it about the University as well. I have been in totalitarian countries where people do get their fingernails pulled out. They do get their genitals crushed. They do get put into terrible conditions. But when I look at my colleagues, I always think, your fingernails are not being torn out and your family is not going to be targeted for murder, that we know of. I mean, it's not really in your mind. We're talking about some kink in your career trajectory. So then I say, shame on you. And that goes for all the people who didn't tell us whatever Snowden told us, or Chelsea Manning, or Daniel Ellsberg, why weren't there more of this.

We have a clearly established principle, that if you think crimes have been conducted in your name by your government, the killing of innocents in Iraq, which was what motivated Bradley Manning, or intruding on people's privacy and manipulating them, that you have an obligation to speak up. You have an obligation to express that. If you feel the channels are blocked, and they certainly are in connection with the National Security Agency-- there are no channels for an individual to speak up-- then you have an obligation to become a whistleblower. That's not some foreign notion. That's something that came out of our tradition. That's our law. We held people accountable. And I think we should recognize what we have at stake here is that there are some brave souls that think freedom is non-negotiable. It defines their soul, their essence, their commitment, their moral core, and they're going to be true to it, and we should back off.

I had one commitment to myself. To the degree that I am a public person, I’m giving a speech, I’m writing something, I’m teaching, I want to be as honest as I can possibly be and not betray the trust that people are putting in me. For me, that was the highest obligation.

End Credits

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, my favorite quote. "Keep an open mind, but not so open your brains fall out." OK.