

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

COURTLAND MILLOY INTERVIEW  
*THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

## **COURTLAND MILLOY**

**Reporter, *The Washington Post***

**February 03, 2017**

Interviewed by: John Maggio

**Total Running Time: 1 hour, 8 minutes and 40 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Courtland Milloy

Columnist, *The Washington Post*

## **Wanting to work at *The Washington Post***

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

May 5th, 1975 I came to *The Washington Post*, from the *Miami Herald* in case you were wondering. Saw an ad in the *Columbia Journalism Review* saying *The Washington Post* was looking for minorities. Yeah. I just learned at the *Miami Herald* that the way to get a raise was to have an offer from somewhere else, and that's all I really wanted, an offer from *The Washington Post* so I could get

a raise at the *Miami Herald* and ended up, bam, getting the job. Washington was intoxicating. I'd never seen architecture like this, for one, these big government buildings, The Capitol. And of course, *The Washington Post*. You know, when they started sending me subscriptions to *The Washington Post* after offering the job, these big things came. They were thick as a tree trunk, the big *Washington Post*. Never seen a newspaper that fat before. Yeah, I wanted to be a part of that.

### **Starting at the *Post***

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

I think in that time when I started, I wasn't that clued in on the implications of Watergate. Nixon resigned later, but how that happened, I had no clue. I mean, it was all new. I didn't know anything about how Washington "worked" or how a newspaper could have the impact, so it was all a very curious place. That's what I liked, but I knew one thing about Washington and that it was a predominantly Black city, and that as big as those newspapers were, the big tree trunk log sized newspaper, there was very little in them about Black people. I said yes, that was good for me. Mm-hmm.

### **First impressions of Ben Bradlee**

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

The first time I saw him, it was like you got to know this guy, yeah. He was quite charming. He did the final say on who got the job, and I don't remember the exact, this was in 1975, but I remember him saying, "Ah, you're a

charmer." He did his little charming thing, and I did my charming thing. Two charmers. I think charm's more important to him than curiosity, which was high on his list. With charm, you could get people to answer a question before the question was even asked. He was great. He was cool. He was called a Boston Brahmin, and I thought Brahmins were bulls and for the longest time, I thought they meant that Ben was a bull. The Bra-man as opposed to the Brahmin, and it worked for a while, it fit. He was the bull, you know. King of the barn. Yeah, I liked him a lot.

**The lack of diversity at the *Post***

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Well, quite frankly, I was more concerned with the manual typewriters and rotary telephones and how to get a story in. The reason that I was able to stay, I believe, was because there was just enough Black people with just enough history to give me some pretty good guidance on it, but the newspaper, the content of the paper that I saw in Miami before I came to *The Post*, I could see how it got that way when I came to the newsroom, but that was good. That means there was a spot. I had a spot.

**Finding a good story**

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

My first beat was just feature writing. I was sent out to Prince George County, which was becoming predominantly Black county with all of the tensions that go with population displacements and things like that, only in this case, Black

people were turning Prince George County into the first county in the country in which, as White people moved out and Black people moved in, the county became wealthier and more educated which was a phenomenon. And I liked that. That's where the action was, when people—the conflicts between people, different people rubbing up against each other and how people adjust. It was a great story, you know, and how the police adjust.

**Walter Washington**

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Well, he was elected mayor in 1978, three years after I came to *The Post*, but he'd already been on the school board and was a—well, had a reputation as an activist. In fact, he was a very important activist in the Civil Rights Movement, you know, part of the SNCC group, Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, and someone I got to know well and liked also. He and Marion made a good inside/outside pair to work off of. Very dynamic figures. The city was—I could not have imagined a place like Washington DC. It was at once a very southern city, and I'm from the south, deep south Louisiana, and I found myself right at home here in terms of the people that I'd be writing about, but it was also an international city with embassies from around the world, and a national city in which all of those southern politicians that I was thinking I was getting away from had been sent right to Washington. So it was that mix, and it made for a dynamic place.

**Don Graham, Ben Bradlee, and the *Post***

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Don Graham, more than other publisher of *The Post* during my time there, wanted the paper to be essentially local, and he was very supportive of carving out that one aspect of the city which was the local, the Black community and that was really good for me. Ben Bradlee had different ideas. He wanted the paper to be national and his secret wish, and I wish he'd let it be known, was that he wanted to rival *The New York Times*, and the way you did that was through impact journalism, or if I may say so, the holy S-H-I-T story. He eventually got them. Got them big time. He wanted it, and it was a ... This is what I really liked because growing up in the south, everything was pretty conservative, even the newspapers that I worked at before. People were pretty straight-laced, we have to represent, you know, we're upholding standards. Ben wanted to mess with it, and I thought, "Oh, this is just great."

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

This guy, this bull, this Brahmin bull, you know, was ready to tear up the china shop, and I thought this was absolutely fantastic journalism, yes. He put—journalism—my dad was a journalism teacher in high school and I was in his homeroom class, and I found that the basics of journalism didn't change even when I got to *The Washington Post*, the who, what, when, where, why, and how, inverted pyramid, leads, so what, graph, kicker on the story. Didn't matter where you went, those were essential. The rest was what kind of shine you would put on them. For what was essentially a trade, okay? A trade. Ben turned it into a profession, you know. Newsprint became silk paper and the ink was black gold. It was glamorous. Just very glamorous and with power, to boot. That was the thing that I'd never experienced. I know

you can make people read, but I didn't know you could make people act on what they read as much as I saw happen at *The Washington Post*.

**Ben Bradlee loved good reporting**

00:08:26:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

For him, it could be incremental. It started with what he didn't know. If you wrote something about the Black community that he didn't know, which was like anything, he'd come and just be fascinated with it, and if something happened to be bizarre, he was like, "Wow." So you got a glimpse of what turned him on. He had some prurient interests, I thought. You know, the pathologies kind of got him really worked up. He was essentially a political animal because he understood the top part of the city, but he wanted that bottom on it, too. He wanted to get there, and well, he did with Janet Cooke.

**Social unrest in D.C.**

00:09:17

COURTLAND MILLOY:

There were housing, public housing, projects but this had been the case all along. I mean, the way the city had been set up, poor Black people were being pushed to the edges of the city. Urban renewal had just, you know, did a job on Black communities and just displaced people, put everybody in these tall boxes type things, or these flat boxes or whatever, but they were families. These were families that had been displaced from poor but stable communities in southwest Washington, which was cleared to make way for a highway, the highway from the Pentagon to the Capitol so that those guys

could move back and forth. Cleaned out a huge swath of the Black community and people were displaced. Then once they were displaced to the southeast, another highway came from Andrews Air Force Base to the Capitol, you know, dividing it even further and pushing more people together. It was, well, it was really bad.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

But people were still struggling against all odds. People wanted—Parents wanted their kids to go to school, people wanted to be safe, but people wanted to survive, and so there was drugs. There was a way to make money, and those very highways that had split the community turned out to be a good way for the suburbanites to come in and get the drugs, and the economy, the underground economy, took root in a powerful way. That was southeast Washington, but that was the part of southeast Washington where if you wanted to go looking for those colorful, criminal characters, you could go there. The city was interesting. We're talking about a very small city, geographically. Maybe a hundred square miles all together, and the city's, basically, geographically in a bowl and the Capitol is in a bowl, in the bottom of the bowl so is the monument, Washington monument.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

On the rim of the bowl, you have southeast Washington. The poorest people in the city had the best view of the city, so you could see the Capitol, and you go through these crime scenes, the murder scenes, and there were dead bodies there and the Capitol dome, you know. It would gleam in the full moon. It would just gleam, and there were lights on the Lincoln Memorial, it

lit it up at night and you'd have dead Black men in the streets of the nation capitol and the Lincoln Monument glowing as if it was a star. It was an amazing contradiction. And I think it also was a agitating thing. You could see the promise of the country, the promise of the city, everything that it was supposed to represent. Equality, freedom, justice, and all around it was the injustice.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

The people who picked up on this contradiction and used it to great effect was the Soviet Union in their propaganda. You know, America talks about all of this greatness of this democracy and capitalism, look at this. And they would put it improved, the very scene, the shantytown, the shacks, and the Capitol dome rising out the middle of it. This was, quite frankly, a big motivating factor for people to start doing something about race. They did not like getting their butts kicked by the Russians on communism versus capitalism, and look at what capitalism was doing. A racist system.

Oppressive system. So people started trying to do something. Among things that people started trying to do, bring more Black people into the newsrooms to better chronicle what was happening, to give voice to the voiceless.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

There was a lot of movement after a while. A lot of movement. Social unrest, and America trying to live up to the promise, but it was all people trying to—making it up as they went along. These were ideals that the newspaper was striving for. The Kerner Commission Report in '67 pointed out what the shortcomings were. The Black community was being viewed through "White

eyes" and just missing the story. It was true. It was true, but there were remedies for it, you know. Get people who could interpret. I didn't like the idea of using Black Washington as a foreign country, you know, you're going in and interpreting what natives speak for white audience, but that was a process. People had to go through that.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

The paper was essentially a White newspaper with a White audience, and you can't overlook the fact that this was a business that had a market, and your paying customers were White people from suburbs, international community, and Black people had Black newspapers. But that was a huge market to ignore, and I think Phil Brown, one of the more progressive owners, recognized that. "We've got all these people here and none of them reading the paper? Why are we letting that money go?"

### **The real Janet Cooke**

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Janet Cooke. Janet Cooke was just a regular person in journalism. Understand we're talking about a newspaper. We're not talking about people with the great literary skills coming in, having written great American novels. These were people who were writing stories about the inch. It was a team effort. You write a story, editor edited it and moves on up the line. She was not special. I say that in terms of how she was received by—all this—if you read any story about Janet Cooke, it'll be about how she walked, how she sashayed, you know, how she arched, how she flung her hair. Her weave, by the way.

The fact that people didn't know what a weave was and they thought it was like, "Wow, she's really ... " And I don't think she was trying to bluff, it was that people had never seen anything. When I say people, I'm talking about White people, the editors. They just didn't see any. This was new to them, but it was all about the resume also. She came in as a Vassar graduate, Sorbonne, speaking foreign languages. That's what turned people on. Phi Beta Kappa and all that kind of stuff. They saw the paper, they wasn't really looking at who she really was. To put a woman like that out on the 14th Street prostitute drug dealer beat, that said something.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

This woman who was billed as a great writer, great clips, Vassar, and they put her out on the street? With prostitutes? Hmm, that's very telling. Very telling. She should have been down in the suburbs, covering city government with a resume like that. That's what you do with people with resumes like that and quickly move them on into different places, but no. She was locked down on the streets. It was pretty bizarre, but it's been said that the Black men didn't like her because she wouldn't date them and all. That's not true. No. She was just a different kind of person. She's kind of off-putting. She was hiding something, you know, and I kind of knew. Everybody had to kind of put on a little mask to get in, because understand this: we were in the process of integrating.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

When Janet Cooke arrived at *The Post* in 1980—the paper was still in the process of integrating. Racial integration that had begun a decade maybe so

ago in earnest was still underway. People didn't recognize it, thought that integration meant lunch counters, back of the bus type things, fair housing, but those were physical aspects. This was psychological integration, and it was arguably as damaging as being beat up because it messed up many a mind. This was Black and White, too, but there was something particular about Black people trying to integrate into a White institution. The idea was can you think like us? Can you perceive the world the way we do? I came with a view based on my segregated background that this is what I wanted to do.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Some people just came to work without a particular point of view and they were ready for, what I would consider, the old eye implant. *The Post* would give them an eye, a way of seeing the world and Janet Cooke, I believe got a little eye implant and wanted to see the world the way she thought people wanted it to be seen. It really tripped her up. Really tripped her up. It was a peculiar kind of jackpot. I think it was fool's gold in this jackpot because again, she was not actually treated like a woman who'd gone to Vassar. She was treated like someone who dropped out of high school. She wanted to get out of that. She really did, badly, and her desire to get out of that—you know pit, created a drive in her that was—you know, it was abnormal. I don't want to judge her. I understand. It was a tension filled newsroom, and designed that way.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

When I came to the paper, there was great competition against *The Washington Evening Star*. You didn't want to be scooped by *The Star*, so you

had the tension that came to be called creative tension, which was a competition, originally stemmed from external places. You have competition that's outside. Now, it's brought inside because everybody—you know what the competition is. You come in, people say, "Why didn't we have this story?" You go out and you don't want to get beat. You don't want to get scooped by *The Washington Star*. Well, *The Washington Star* died, and the tensions really didn't have much place to go. Anyway, the point being that there was tension created in the newsroom of competitiveness. Left mismanaged, people would compete against themselves, each other. Intramural.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

I think Janet Cooke got caught up in thinking she was supposed to be competing against someone for something. Who she perceived as her competitors, I guess other Blacks because *The Post* didn't, you know, there seemed to be only room for one Black here, one Black there. There wasn't going to be room for everybody. There was one. She wanted to be it, so every other Black person was kind of like going to be elbowing her out the way, which was not true, but it was understandable that she would begin to think that way. You know, she wrote for the Weekly once a week, and when you write for—I mean, when I started journalism, you could easily write two stories a day, you know, for newspapers. You wrote stories and especially if your beat was the little, you know, little civic association feature type things. She wrote about beauty pageants. She wrote about events. You know, on the community calendar, you pick an event and you write about it.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

You stack them up and put them all in the paper one time, yeah. Not taking anything away from her, but journalism is a team sport. She had editors. Editors who knew that Ben Bradlee was interested in this person, and when Bradlee is interested in a person, his managing editor Howard Simons would send a word, make it work. You don't fail, you make it work. She had the right cards, she had the right mentors, everything. They were going to make it work for her. The stories weren't—I didn't think they were all that, but again, when she started getting into the writing about the prostitutes and the pimps, they was all, "Oh, here we go. Holy shit." When she found out that this was it, she's like, "Let's go do more. I'm going to holy shit myself onto the national desk, out of this." Oh, yeah. Made sense, I mean, it was the way the game was played.

**Janet Cooke and the story that never happened**

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

I heard about it when she started working on it in earnest. Apparently, it had gone through. She'd started out working on one thing, it evolved into this and then the eight year old heroin addict she had found, and that's when I heard about it. I thought, "Wow, this is going to really be a holy shit story." And was curious to see how it unfolded, who was this person. Now, I heard stories. You always hear stories about the drug world. The nation of Columbia in South America began upping the cocaine thing as we got into the disco era. You'd hear all kind of things. The little baby coming into Dulles airport that's dead, but stuffed with cocaine, or coffins full of dope. All kinds of the most bizarre

stories. Some may have been true. Some may have been like urban legends, but if you had one, wow, this is going to be pretty bizarre.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Then it became a secret how it was coming along. I talked to her editor who had, she just didn't believe, this was the first editor on the Weekly, didn't believe that she had the chops to pull that off. She could barely find her way around town, but here she went. Nobody saw the story until after it ran, and then I was like, "Holy shit." The story was—well, it changed my view about a lot of things, about what people were prepared to believe and overlook. It wasn't that the piece was packed with details that would make you believe it. It was all the stuff that was missing. It was incredible. It was the craziest thing I'd ever read, but people were buying it. I thought, "Wow, this is ..." When it won a Pulitzer prize, of course, it was like the Pulitzer board became shit to me. That was like this means nothing. People believe that? To hell with it.

### **Reading a passage from Janet Cooke's story**

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

"Jimmy, Jimmy is 8 years old and a third-generation heroin addict, a precocious little boy with sandy hair, velvety brown eyes and needle marks freckling the baby-smooth skin of his thin brown arms." My god, am I supposed to really keep wanting to—okay, make into like one of those Grimm brothers' fairy tales, those little, "here comes the Wicked Witch of the West." "He nestles in a large, beige reclining chair in the living room of his comfortably furnished home in Southeast Washington. There is an almost

cherubic expression on his small, round face as he talks about life, clothes, money, the Baltimore Orioles and heroin. He has been an addict since the age of five." Remember this Jimmy is not the first Jimmy. This is the second Jimmy. She couldn't find the first eight-year-old Jimmy, so she came up with a new Jimmy that did not have a trail. The other Jimmy would have been found through a rehabilitation center, so you could track whether or not it was real or not because it was attached to something. This Jimmy was not attached to anything.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Jimmy went to school, but we don't know what school he went to. You know? Jimmy had parents—The story was just blatantly crazy. Come on, people. But that's a long time ago. Again, the point being that in our business, perceptions of who we are and what we do, it's all over the place. One of the problems with newspapers not covering Black communities is you could get away with this stuff. People didn't have a clue. Now, to Ben's credit, he already said, "I don't know anything about this." He wanted to learn. I mean, he really worked at it. In fact, in some ways, he actually started the movement toward hiring Black people to know more about the community in 1952, a year after I was born, in fact. He was a police reporter for *The Washington Post*. Covered a race riot over swimming pool integration in southeast Washington. That started a ball rolling that continued on through the riots and was there still steaming along when he got back to *The Washington Post*.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

The coverage was just pathetic. It was pitiful. In fact, let's be frank. It was racist. Ben even says so. It was racist. People did not like Black folk. *The Post* was complicit in fomenting a race riot in 1919. Different version of *The Post*, of course, but same major newspaper. Basically advertising, "Here's where the militia should be tomorrow, so we can kick some Negroes butts." They showed up and race riot. This is bad history, bad blood between *The Washington Post* and the Black community based on stereotypes, based on ignorance, and based on wanting to maintain the power. A view of the world, as people had already known it. Nobody wanted to rewrite those mental maps. This is how the world is, it's a White dominated world, we want to keep it that way. These other kinds are just visiting. Slaves, ex-slaves, moving through.

00:29:08:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

When I started at *The Post*, one of the most interesting calls I got was from a guy with a real southern accent and he says, "How can you use the White man's invention to criticize the White man? Who you think invented your newspaper presses?" That was the view. I liked it because that was, "How dare you? This is our stuff." I remember one time that I wanted to do a open mail bag and put some of this stuff— because when Reagan came into office, which was about the same time Janet Cooke came, we was talking about welfare queens and it was just out. Things just came out. People were just, this is the first time people would call you derogatory names and sign their name to it, and their addresses, and I was surprised that these addresses were Connecticut Avenue. These were in the good, smart, wealthy part of town. I said, "Oh, I get to do my mail bag on this."

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Ben didn't like that idea, he thought they represent a minority. Most people don't think like that. Oh, I wish he was alive now to see the Donald Trump era. Oh my goodness, yes, yes, yes. Janet Cooke walked into that. She walked into a time when Reagan and his welfare queens and his Cadillac mamas, and the loafing, lazy Black men were all out there, and it was like this is different. Before Reagan got into office, the view was that if you wrote about some social ill, somebody would do something about it. It was just a matter of letting people know what was happening and that the better angels would emerge and would deal with it. Well, by the time Janet Cooke came, that was not the way it worked. You put that out there and people say, "See? We told you. How low can they go?" That was the question. What is the bottom of the barrel? She gave them, "Well, look, there's Jimmy." But it was such a cartoon. i couldn't believe people— People were predisposed to believe it, even with that little cartoon picture and all the things.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

She went out looking for a new, more potent kind of heroin, first of all, because it was killing people, right? But here you have an eight year old who'd been on it since he was five, and going to school talking about, "I want to be a math man because I can count and do all this stuff." It was just too funny, and—she found him by putting business cards in a playground and somehow it got to Jimmy's mom who called her and said, "I'm Jimmy's mom, why are you looking for ..." They got together for a meeting. Anyway, it says something about the psyche. It was part of institutional psyche that ... It was

a holdover. It was a holdover from old racist days, southern stereotypes. These people are like animals.

**The impact of Janet Cooke's story**

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Because of that first Jimmy. They thought that this was the first one connected to the—the first Jimmy was connected to a rehabilitation center, but it was not clear how old he was or what—that maybe this person had somehow gotten into a stash and accidentally, and been taken to—or someone who had been born with heroin withdrawal type syndromes, or someone who had been used to transport the drugs into, you know, in a diaper or something and it got absorbed. There's some bizarre kind of thing that had happened, but that person, that person was no longer eight by the time it came up. That particular person was grown up. At least in late teenager, and all that other stuff was behind him, to whatever extent it was, but it certainly wasn't a mainlining kid doing—and that's what Marion Barry, the mayor and other people thought she was talking about. They thought she had— When they said, "We know who this is." They said, "Yeah, we know how ... " Because he knew the people at the RAP, which was the name of the rehabilitation drug rehab program. He knew how, he thought maybe "Yeah, okay, we know who it is." They tracked it down to see if, you know, was this person still ... They found out and they called it off.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Yeah, they thought they knew, but that wasn't the one. It was the new Jimmy, the one that she claimed was still out there. So the city went into a tizzy and when they realized that it was not the one, they basically called it off. Now, it's very hard as the smarter people know to disprove a negative. You can't say that Jimmy didn't exist because how could you say that? That was the whole catch. Nobody could really say it, but if you looked at that story, I don't see how you couldn't. *The Post* had a golden reputation for taking an unbelievable story, just the most unbelievable story, and showing, yes, these third rate burglars did this thing and got—and the president came down. Who would have thunk it?

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

You put something like Jimmy in *The Washington Post* and this is the power of the story. It was not the story, it was the vehicle. You use *The Washington Post* for that, where people just knew that you don't get, you know, whatever you got in *The Post* it was going to be true, as wild as it may sound because they had proven that this is what *The Post* can do. Take the unbelievable and show, despite all the denials of the president and his men, this is it. Having Marion Barry saying, "We don't know about this story." People wanted to believe it anyway. I mean, it's basically pimping on *The Washington Post's* name is what it was. Look, it was just a story. It wasn't the story. The problem, my problem, with the story was that after it was found to be false, other Black reporters coming up behind Janet Cooke caught hell. People— Other black reporters who were trying to get a job at *The Washington Post* went through the most intense and even sometimes humiliating—you know, make sure that we didn't get another one of those again.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

It's like Donald Trump, you know, banning everybody from these countries. On a small scale, of course, but yeah. People's instincts to protect themselves when they were afraid, people were afraid, people were shocked. Ultimately, the story itself was nobody was hurt during the making of this story because it was a fake hit.

### **Debunking Janet Cooke's story**

00:36:55:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

When they asked. I wasn't – I wanted to see how this played out, but again, I'm here to live and learn. I had no idea how a paper like *The Washington Post* worked, how a town like Washington worked. So this was, "Wow, what's going to happen next?" Because I had written about that kind of subject before, I was eventually asked, "Well, what do you think?" I said, "I thought it was not true." But by then, it was like it was too late. It was too late, it was out there. After– after she won the Pulitzer and the questions start rolling in, I was asked again, you know, to go out with her, but not to find Jimmy because this Jimmy had a dad who was threatening Janet's life and we weren't going to go messing around with that Jimmy.

00:37:55:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

So, we were supposed to go out and find another Jimmy, which would be Jimmy number three, to find another eight-year-old heroin addict out there. I'm saying, "Wow, this is so bizarre." That's what we did, went looking

for—but, I thought, "Why look for the third Jimmy? Let's go where she said the second Jimmy lived, the one that she wrote about." There was supposed to be, I guess, on every corner, all scattered all around the city, these little kids who mainline potent heroin that people said they didn't know what it was, but it was basically a version of fentanyl, which is that stuff that they came up with at the US Naval Research Center, chemical form. It would kill you by looking at it, but not Jimmy. No. I mean, I laugh at it because it's just funny. It's just funny how these things work.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

I don't think it—I had the impression that nobody got really hurt. Maybe some egos were bruised, you know. Ben emerged as Ben. Woodward emerged as the wealthiest, most prominent guy. Nobody attaches Janet's name to them. Janet got \$500,000 for a script on a screenplay that never got made, but she still got paid. It was the game. It was the game of nerves, who had the nerve. Janet had the nerve. Boy, she had the nerve. Look, she almost pulled it off. If she had, I think I probably would have paid a price because the thought was ... Even though I had been asked for my opinion, when I expressed that I didn't think it was true, it was like, "Oh, he's just being jealous." Which means, in effect, that I was lying on a colleague because I didn't want her to succeed, so if she had succeeded, my ass would have been grass. No doubt about it. Yeah, I was happy that it blew up, but it was not to see her suffer or anything. I just found it just a fun game.

### **The aftermath of the Janet Cooke scandal**

00:40:29:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

You have to bear with me on the recollection, remember, I try to think about how it really went down in the moment, but I do know that questions were being asked about it, and here was the dilemma that I thought was just delicious. If *The Post* didn't identify Jimmy, that meant that they were abetting a murder or attempted murder, right, on a eight year old, which was like—so they had to reveal, they had to find a way to reveal this kid or *The Post* will be morally bankrupt. I mean, there's just no way you can justify watching a eight year old die like that, but there was no Jimmy so there was no real dilemma. But—Which is why the thing is so interesting because all of this dilemma came up over fiction. I mean, it was like a hypothetical.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

What would you do if? Howard Simon did not like this, the whole idea of *The Post* being in that position. No, but they didn't want to make Janet tell who her sources were, so they sent Janet and I out to find another one. So we got in a car and drove around a little bit. I wanted to kind of get to see where Jimmy was. Again, the city is not that big. People know things. If she could put her business cards out on a playground and it would cause Jimmy's mother to call, well, that meant a lot of people must have known about Jimmy. So we went to these places and eventually it occurred to me that Janet didn't have any idea where she was in the city. We were right in the neighborhood where Jimmy, on every street in the neighborhood, where Jimmy supposedly lived and where this man with the knife was going to kill her if, you know, find out about it. She didn't have a clue. You know.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Then she was getting really frightened and angry, and that was sad but again, she still had a lot of nerve, which was pretty impressive. That's a lot of nerve. But getting caught in a lie, see, any human being knows, "Oh, my goodness, the lie's falling apart." Anybody who's lived long enough knows what it's like to get caught in something like that, even as a kid. I saw the kid come out in her. I didn't hammer anything home. People think, "Oh, he ratted her out." Well, no, no. I didn't. I didn't ask to be a part of any of it. I was asked to see what I thought and I said, "I don't buy it." That was pretty much, "Yeah, sure you don't." I think they believed me, and they said, "Holy shit, we've got a problem." When it all came out in the wash, it was like, "Well, we have to figure out why we didn't believe Courtland. Let's say this."

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

That's that, but that became the reality of it. "We got this guy who's professional jealousy." Again, look, in the scheme of things, it was part of the integration process. It's a hard row to hoe. People clashing, people coming up against each other's view of the world, people trying to make it. People trying to make it. We were talking now about moving from social justice to economic justice. Janet Cooke wanted to get paid—rightfully, she wanted to move to a position where you got more money and a little more prestige. That was not going to be easy, no matter how you sliced it because for her to get it, it meant that someone else would have to give it up and that someone else would probably be White. So she used all the tricks in the book.

### **Janet Cooke winning the Pulitzer**

00:44:36:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

Yeah my mind was blown, but again, living and learning. If this was what was considered Pulitzer standards, that's all I had to say. "Wow." My notion had been that this is, you know, might be something that's nice to have, a Pulitzer prize, but after that, it's like, "I don't think so." This is pretty corny stuff, and I was pleased to find that Bradlee basically thought the same thing after *The Post* got stiffed for Pulitzer prizes during the Watergate thing. The paper was up for maybe almost four prizes. It got one. Other people's prizes got traded away in a little backroom dealings that goes on, and I learned about that, how it really works because of Janet Cooke. I thought, "Hmm. You keep that." I was also disappointed that Janet Cooke's prize came at the expense of a friend of mine named Henry Mitchell, who was the Garden writer, but him writing about a garden was like writing about the essence of human life. You know, one of those guys who could see the mini universe in a pod of a sunflower type thing.

00:45:52:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

He was a cool guy. He was dying of, I believe, prostate of pancreatic cancer at the time and I just thought, "Wow, you know, he really wrote his ass off for this one." And he was in there, he was a winner and they switched it around. They switched it around and I thought that was messed up, more than anything else. When the prize was announced and all of the stuff started gushing in, that blew me away. People were—I didn't understand why people were rooting for a story about an eight year old on heroin who'd never been found. Basically, they were rooting for a corpse, a little Black corpse. And I

thought, "Wow." She was getting flowers and all these congratulatory notes. It's like Trump revealing so much about other people around him. He—highlights a lot of things, duplicity, hypocrisy.

00:46:58:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

Janet Cooke had that effect. She let people see some things about themselves that they weren't pleased about. And to that extent, it's good, some introspection. You know, how could this happen? Why did we get so involved in this like that? And I think that was good. Again, went into the integration process at a very psychological level, now, this is not physical violence. This is getting inside people's head and wrecking havoc.

### **Janet Cooke and the *Post***

00:47:35:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

At some level, I think they knew that story was fake, which is why they could do it. I'm just figuring it. This is, you know, it was a hypothetical. It wasn't a real kid. The sensibilities of Bob Woodward, Howard Simon, Ben Bradlee, these are not—that's not how they thought. This had to be in another dimension. They had to know at some level that this was not real, you know... because the standard of journalism, remember what we're talking about here. A five year old mainlining potent heroin and then going to school talking about, "Yeah, I'm going to be a math whiz, man." All that kind of stuff. The most naïve person would say this is bogus. They were journalists. Like I said, even in high school, the basic principles of newspaper journalism had

been the same. You fact check. Here's a kid that was going to school, which means he had to come to the attention of somebody.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

He had a teacher, you know. He had friends. There was some way to at least triangulate, if you will, his existence. There's no way you can exist like that, unless you think DC was some kind of zoo. Again, just based on basic journalism, people kind of knew. At worst it was just institutional racism. There were enough people involved in that, that—that's the only thing I can say. The system. It was the same system in which year after year, you can look at the pay scale. White men, Black men, White women, Black women at the bottom, and it was always like that. It still is, you know. That's structural, and there were a lot of other structural things in *The Post* that made—they put Black people down at the bottom of the barrel, and they wanted to see more of it.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

It was on automatic. There's a certain amount of things just happening as the day-to-day. The paper gets reinvented every day, kind of quick thoughts. Boom, boom, boom decisions made, boom, going to run with it. By the time the doubts were in—I think when Woodward said, "Okay, no point in pulling out now." After it ran, got the publicity, in for a dime, in for a dollar. This is before the Pulitzer. We submitted it, we ran it. Boom, so their doubts, hard to disprove, you know, say that the negative is not there. Sure... and people talk about how well it was written and what a pretty girl wrote it. Again, new things, new people, new ways of being. *The Post* drew people in from all over

the country, and I don't think people realized how different we—it's just an amazing thing that we've only had one civil war in this country because people are so different.

00:50:41:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

It's like coming from another planet. Janet Cooke came from another planet. Now, she was hardly recognized by anybody Black, but White people thought they knew her based on her paper. Vassar. Sorbonne. Phi Beta Kappa. All the rest of the stuff didn't matter. I think one of the most sensitive of the editors, and actually one of the best editors at *The Post* I've worked with, was David Maraniss. I think they had a relationship in which they could talk. He's an excellent interviewer, so, you know, get things out. I think that's probably one of the people, but it was a combination of pressures. *The Post* is a tough place. You get grilled. They do the good cop/bad cop thing. They can both put a hurting on you. Again, newspapers, newsrooms are like that.

00:51:44:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

There aren't such things as a nice newsroom because it's a fight for reality. Whose reality is it? Whose point of view matters? Whose objectivity will be our standard? It was shifting, and Janet Cooke was torn. She had this new eye implant, seeing things one way but I think deep down kind of feeling different. She got a lot of glory for it, though, and \$500,000, remember that. I thought after a while that she should have kept that prize. They should not have given the prize back. Because that was the standard that they went by. That's who they were. Give it back for what? They wheeled and dealt and got it in. She should have kept it. It said fabricated all over it, still put it in

there, but journalism prizes are just—it's what people like at the time, what that group liked.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

That's what the group went with and they should kept it. They maybe could have renamed it the Roxanne Pulitzer prize. If I got a Pulitzer, it would be named for Roxanne Pulitzer, the wayward daughter. No, these prizes, why not? She was the pioneer in fake news. Her time has come. She was just ahead of her time. I really hold no animosity, I thought it was just the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. It was thrilling. It was thrilling to see how people work with this. Ben is expert at damage control. Howard Simons is just a master at, you know, strategies of all sorts. I mean, he was the driving force behind Watergate, and it was interesting to see people work with this. How do we get our ass out of this sling?

### **Integrating the *Post***

00:53:51:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

Look, race— integration is not an easy thing. People don't know what they don't know. It takes a long time. This has been in the process a long time. You couldn't expect Bill to understand the racial implications of it, or how race played a factor, or the nature of the creative tension game. You needed nerve. You needed to be competitive. You need to be able to withstand stuff. Kay Graham set the standard, a high bar, for having nerve. I mean, they said that she was ballsy. Ben followed with his brass clankers. Woodward and Bernstein, clankers. They valued nerve in that place. You went with it, you

stood by it. That's what the writing business was. You put it out there and you stand by it.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Janet Cooke did, and she held on till the very last. God, she held on. You have to admire her for that. Yeah. She revealed things that were very important to be revealed, that we all have these little weak spots. Ben says, "Oh, anybody can be conned." But he put it on the con person. The conman will say, "Well, you know, if you hadn't been this or that, you wouldn't have been conned." Usually greedy. That's the way it worked, they wanted that thing, they wanted it. They wanted it so bad they could taste it, that little chocolate girl with the weave. They liked that so much. Oh, well, that's so fascinating. Anyway, feminine mystique.

### **The cultural impact cause by Janet Cooke**

00:55:47:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

Well, the immediate effect was to subject all new Black applicants to the third degree. And anybody who brought—now, you understand that most Black people were concentrated in the social welfare part of the reporting business. They had too many of us, first of all, writing about pathology when the Washington D.C. community was basically a middle class with deep, rich culture. But that was given short strips, for the pathology. Anybody who would bring back a story about welfare, anything, it was like they were grilled on it. "How do you know this is true? Who are your sources? Who did this? We're going to have to talk to them." Creative tension was designed to get

people really energized, even with this little frivolous anxiety, anxiety about reaching the ideal, the vision that was set out by the—which was impact, you know, make a difference.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

Make people think. If that was what the object was, well, what came next was totally demoralizing. It was like "don't bring us this stuff without it being like this, this, this." Suck the air out. Editing started becoming censorship, because the paper was in a protective, defensive crouch around that stuff. Black reporters paid a price, not just at *The Post*, but in all newspapers where Black reporters were working. This was a big deal for the press. I think the National Association of Editors or something like that asked me—the American Society of Newspaper Editors were meeting at the time, and Ben Bradlee was exhibit A. Don Graham. Hmm. But they did, they survived it, you know. Learned from it, and why not?

00:57:50:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

Black people had to learn more, but it was harder for Black people to integrate than for White people to kind of make room for it. The fact of the matter was none of it would have happened if Don Graham, Ben Bradlee, and Howard Simons had not been committed to bringing Black people into the newsroom in the first place. That's one way they could avoid the whole thing. Keep the newsroom White. Maybe you have another kind of thing, one of those White people making up a little story or something like that, but it's not the same.

**Ben Bradlee's originality**

00:58:28:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

Ben, what I kind of understand about the Brahmin, is that he really wasn't into—he never wanted to be an elitist. His gravelly voice disguised, he might have talked, had he embraced that identity like John F. Kennedy with that Kennedy-esque thing, but no, he put gravel on his. Down, and down to earth kind of guy, talk like that. When he'd come in the newsroom, he'd come to me and he'd talk about, "What's up, my brother?" He wanted to be like a brother and over time, he actually learned how to do a high five right. At first he started out, it was way up high. He slapped the hand like he was trying to do a basketball play, but in the end, it was like a low high five with a little pop to it. Brother. I always thought Ben had a secret desire to kind of have some, you know, black part of it because it was just the culture.

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COURTLAND MILLOY:

He could take—He took from—He took stuff from the Irish, he got some of that ballsy stuff from like being a, you know, you thought he was a brawler. He got that from the Irish. If he was Black, he'd have been a hustler. If the hustlers on the street had Bradlee's connection, they'd be running a paper, too. It was like that. He had that. He was perceived like he had the suave of a jewel thief, a little Cary Grant type of guy, but he added to that over time. Newsroom became more integrated, he started becoming like Billy D. Williams. You know, smooth operator, putting it on there. He had the walk. It was fun to watch, and you knew he was trying to learn. He'd always, "Who is

that Black person?" Every time he saw a Black person. I guess you was supposed to know. "Who is that one? Who is that person? What is the issue?" It was like you don't want to tell—you don't know every Black person in the world because he'd say, "Well, why are you here for? I'm trying to learn." He wanted to learn. It was crude, but it was honest. It was honest.

01:00:34:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

I found out a lot of things about— wealthy people have a lot in common with really poor people. Their flamboyance, their fearlessness. It's almost like what do you have to lose? They're not going to take anything from Bradlee, really, you know? That's a hundred year old Brahmin type thing. More than that, and what you going to take from the poor people? Only difference is poor people can't hide their stuff, and Bradlee didn't want to hide it. His was right out there in the open. It was kind of cool to watch him maneuver. Now, I'm from the south, so this was new to me. There were Black people from the Martha's Vineyard, who was familiar with the New England Brahmin stuff, and they were—they didn't tolerate that. You don't get gruff around them. Again, I thought Brahmin was a bull and that was what he was, a bull. It was interesting. Very colorful. Very charismatic. If you wanted to see the real power of charm, you watch him and you say, "Uh huh, you have a certain kind of smile."

01:01:50:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

Oh, he was reinventing himself. He was trying to add some substance to this identity. I mean, you watch the Masterpiece Theater and you see Alistair Cook sitting up there and you wonder, "Well, what the hell does he do after he's

finished with the program?" Probably goes and irons his socks or something. Bradlee wanted some—he honed his people skills. He had some connections and he operated with some high power people. He had good, good counselors to help him to maneuver in that world, but he wanted to be down with the people. It wasn't like Steve Martin trying to be Black, but some time it had that kind of—kind of feeling like, oh man, he wanted to be able to dance. If he could just really dance good, that would be cool. Just wanted that extra thing.

01:02:55:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

Anyway, it's all about being human. It's all about the mind changing, and all about trying to do right. How much right can I do without losing my good stuff? Most people didn't try. Most newspapers to this day are all White. Most don't really go that extra length. If they did ... And they had some successes, had some good successes.

***All the President's Men***

01:03:31:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

They were filming that movie when I came. Actually, a few months after I came, I think it was more of a reward. I was walking around the corner, newsroom, and I bumped right into Katharine Graham. I mean, boom, buxom to the chest. Boom, hit. I was terrified, I was like, "Oh, excuse me." She says, "For what?" It was like, "I knocked you back, you didn't knock me back." She was a tough one, but I got passes to a premier from her of this movie. I think they were still doing some extra filming, the camera thing was still in. Like I

said, they were putting some sheen on this trade. It was turning that ink into black gold. They had made a movie, heroic—it was fun.

**Working at the *Post***

01:04:28:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

When I came, the applications, literally, to be at *The Washington Post* was rising to the ceiling. Floor to ceiling. People wanted to be there. And I had just accidentally, just accidentally. It was almost like I was on a cosmic wave to come and be a part, watch this integration process going. That's what it was. Yeah, and I'm from Louisiana. People died. People were killed for this thing called integration. Here I was, somehow or other through this Affirmative Action thing. It wasn't just that, it was good people. Ben, Len Downie. I had a Black editor from Little Rock, Arkansas who basically kept me there. He said, "We going to give him a chance, I'm going to work with him." Otherwise I'd have been gone. This was Herbert Denton. He was the mentor for Milton Coleman and myself and a lot of others. A Harvard grad who had been in Vietnam, in stars and stripes, with Don Graham. When Don started to make his move to push for more local coverage, including the Black community, he got this— Herb Denton, his buddy, his war buddy, to come.

01:05:46:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

It just happened that I come at that time. It just so happened that there was a Black security guard who let me wait in the lobby until Elsie Carper, who was the White woman personnel director for the newsroom who'd been at the paper since 1939, but was very progressive. Says, "Okay. Give me an

application and we'll call you if we see something we like." Then you come into Ben Bradlee's world.

### **Working with Ben Bradlee**

01:06:20:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

Again, Bradlee one-on-one, he was just a really cool dude. He was trying. You just saw a guy who did not have to put himself out. Didn't have to, but he did, and he wasn't patronizing too much, I don't think, with Black people. He'd say what he thought. He'd call you a asshole if he wanted to. Even the people he'd call asshole—see, there were guys who were much more sophisticated than I was, Black guys. Much more talented. They'd go toe to toe with Bradlee. I mean, the people who were more responsible for me being there was seven Black reporters who filed a EELC suit against *The Washington Post*, having met with Bradlee many times and argued ferociously with him because he didn't want to be perceived as a racist. How could he be a racist, you know? And I thought so, too. Now, this guy, one of the things Bradlee did was give me a copy of *Conversations with Kennedy*. I'm saying, "Wow, this guy was with John Kennedy." Now, Kennedy's picture, along with Martin Luther King, was on a lot of homes that I'd done interviews in.

01:07:31:00

COURTLAND MILLOY:

People respected them, and I'm rubbing shoulders with the guy who rubbed shoulders with? Had his arms around Jackie O? Ben Bradlee's so smooth. He couldn't be a racist, right? You know, but it wasn't about—You come to understand, it's not so much about the person being a racist, it's about what

is the milieu that it's working in? What is the inheritance? What is the structural inheritance of people who've found themselves in that they are obligated to protect, you know, if they want to get paid, too? The fact that Bradlee would put the establishment at risk the way he did, just said something about him—just to break stuff up, and that was good because the only way the structure was going to change. Of course, it only went so far. We are what we are and still a long way to go, and he knew that.

**END TC: 01:08:40:00**