

**Broadway Takes on *The Columnist*:
A Case Study with Joseph Alsop**

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Popular culture regularly draws upon the past to comment upon the present. “To make cinema meaningful to audiences, artists incorporate a variety of subtle hints about their stories’ connections to current issues,” writes Robert Brent Toplin in his book *Reel History*. “Indeed, in choosing their subjects, filmmakers often seek [historical] topics that relate to current fashions, attitudes, hopes, and anxieties of the viewing public.”¹ The same is true of works in other media, such as David Auburn’s play *The Columnist*. The show, which premiered on Broadway in 2012 and starred John Lithgow, tells the story of syndicated Washington columnist Joseph Alsop. Although it is set in the 1960s, the play speaks to 21st century concerns (it was promoted as representing “a vital letter from a radically changing decade to our own turbulent era”).² *The Columnist* offers a case study of the rise and fall of high-powered Washington columnists and raises questions about the extent to which the political columnist’s decline in influence has been for good or for ill.

Joseph Alsop

Joseph Alsop was largely forgotten when the play about him debuted. In his heyday, though, his column ran three times a week in as many as 300 newspapers across

the United States. He also had great longevity, writing the column from 1937 to 1974. Alsop was a liberal on domestic issues who staunchly backed Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal and who stood up to Joseph McCarthy. At the same time, he was a fervent anti-Communist on international issues and a prominent hawk on Vietnam. In addition, although he had a wife, he was a closeted gay man. During a 1957 trip to Moscow, Alsop had a sexual liaison with a man who turned out to be working for the KGB. Compromising pictures were secretly taken and unsuccessful attempts were made to blackmail him.³

The Columnist addresses the Moscow episode and Alsop's relationship with his wife. However, for the purposes of this essay, it is the columnist's power that is of primary interest. "No columnist has any power at all," declared Alsop several years after his retirement. "They always *think* they do, but they don't. If you act as a transmission belt for facts that have an impact, you can have an impact as a transmission belt. But the idea that anyone in the United States is foolish enough to think the way they do because some damn columnist thinks that way in the morning paper is an idea that only a columnist could believe."⁴ Journalist David Halberstam had an entirely different take on Alsop. Halberstam called him "the most imperial and imperious of American journalists" and a "man of Washington and its power" who "wrote not to enlighten but to *effect*, to move the principal players."⁵

In fact, Alsop thrived on access to the powerful. He claimed that he helped persuade John F. Kennedy to put Lyndon Johnson on the 1960 Democratic presidential ticket. Following the 1963 Kennedy assassination in Dallas, Alsop urged Johnson to form the Warren Commission, when Johnson wanted to leave the investigation of the assassination entirely to the Texas authorities. Later, after Johnson had committed another 50,000 troops

to Vietnam, the president reportedly said, “There, that should keep Joe Alsop quiet for a while.”⁶ Yet the Vietnam War eventually wrecked the columnist’s credibility. According to Halberstam, “Alsop was obsessed by the war and talked about it incessantly, though in fact he was wrong in almost everything he said or wrote.”⁷ It was Alsop who infamously wrote of Vietnam in 1965 that “at last there is light at the end of the tunnel.”⁸ The ongoing stalemate over the next several years did not alter his convictions in the slightest. In 1971, Alsop attacked Congressional opponents of the Vietnam War as being “downright eager to be proved right by an American defeat” and “loath [to] being proved wrong by U.S. success in Southeast Asia”—an accusation that fellow columnist James Reston said was “unspeakable.”⁹

The Columnist

Joseph Alsop’s hubris is at the heart of *The Columnist*. “We don’t give two shits what they want to read,” he says of his readers early in the play. “We tell them what they need to know.”¹⁰ Reveling in his connections, Alsop exults over John F. Kennedy’s ascension to the presidency in 1961. “He’s *our man*,” he tells his brother (Stewart Alsop was also a journalist and coauthor of Joseph Alsop’s column for a time). “A tough man and a thoughtful one too, the kind we’ve been dreaming of and waiting for. He’s like [Adlai] Stevenson with balls.”¹¹ Kennedy’s close ties to Alsop are underscored by an event taken from real life—on the night of his inauguration, the president visits the columnist’s home to celebrate.

Then, however, Kennedy is assassinated, and Alsop grows ever more hardheaded concerning Vietnam and the new Johnson administration, which he believes is too soft. He calls James Reston at *The New York Times* and demands that Reston fire *The Times’s*

Vietnam correspondents, including David Halberstam, who plays a significant role in *The Columnist*. When Stewart Alsop suggests to his brother that Halberstam and antiwar activists may be right about the war's futility, Joseph Alsop is contemptuous: "They are *children*. They're in their *twenties*." Rather than writing for children, he insists that he writes for the "influential." Alsop also says that he has just returned from Vietnam, where he "saw the endlessly resourceful military of a great and benevolent power in a twilight struggle for freedom against an inhuman enemy." It is a viewpoint shaped by what he sees as the highest and most credible of sources—Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and General William Westmoreland, the men overseeing the U.S. military effort. "For God's sake, don't expertise and authority mean anything anymore?" the columnist fumes.¹²

It does Alsop no good. He loses his brother to leukemia, his wife to divorce, and his beloved stepdaughter to the antiwar movement, prompting him finally to break down in tears: "I have no one." Still he cannot and will not change, remaining defiant until the end. "You think you've got us beat," Alsop tells one of the Russians who had been involved in the blackmail attempt against him several years previously. "You think you've got us on the run in Vietnam, you've got our youth running riot in the streets, naked and stoned out of their minds, you think you're winning. Well, not while I'm around, thank you very much. ... [We] will burn you bastards out of the jungles and *we will win* there, there and everywhere."¹³

Discussion

Playwright David Auburn has said that became interested in Joseph Alsop because he saw historical parallels between the columnist and the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, particularly the continued refusal of some officials and pundits to admit that they

were wrong about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction. “How do you arrive at that point when you are so firmly committed to a particular point of view that nothing will dissuade you or force you to re-examine it?” said Auburn.¹⁴ Indeed, the similarities between Alsop and Vietnam and the later war in Iraq are many. Alsop saw himself as a transmission belt for facts—facts that came from highly placed sources with whom he regularly interacted socially as well as professionally. He proudly proclaimed that he wrote for the influential. He entertained the president of the United States at his home and thought of him as *his* man. He had access to the top people running the Vietnam War and quoted what they told him.

Now consider what happened with *The New York Times*’s Judith Miller, vice presidential aide Lewis “Scooter” Libby, and claims of WMDs in Iraq: Another well-connected journalist allowed herself to be manipulated into promoting the pro-war stance of an administration fully committed to military intervention, even when subsequent events cast serious doubt on that strategy.¹⁵

For his part, Auburn calls himself an “obsessive political blog reader,”¹⁶ consistent with a 21st century model of news that is less reliant on so-called legacy media as represented by inside-the-Beltway Washington journalists who have been vilified as “stenographers to power.”¹⁷ Auburn has said that he wanted to “look back at a time when it was very different, when a few guys had the authority over the discourse and impact of policy. And that's changed so much—largely for good, I would say.”¹⁸ It is in fact difficult to think of any Washington journalist having so much sway today, and *The Columnist* dramatically demonstrates the upside of that.

Nonetheless, the question that Alsop raises in the play—“don’t expertise and

authority mean anything anymore?”—also resonates. As media critic Eric Alterman has observed regarding the play, today’s “democratization of our political discourse is very much a mixed blessing.”¹⁹ Given how much disinformation is being spread through the media and how the need for accuracy and context is as paramount as ever, we surely still need some form of expertise and authority. If we do not get it from a Joseph Alsop, where do we get it from?

Endnotes

¹ Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 42.

² The promotional phrase appears on the back cover of the published text of the play. See David Auburn, *The Columnist* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2012).

³ See Eric Pace, “Joseph Alsop Dies at Home at 78; Political Columnist Since the 30’s,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/08/29/obituaries/joseph-alsop-dies-at-home-at-78-political-columnist-since-the-30-s.html>; Eric Alterman, “A Newsmaker in Every Sense of the Word,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/theater/the-columnist-dissects-joseph-alsop.html?_r=0; David Streitfeld, “The Hawk and the Vultures,” *The Washington Post*, April 13, 1995, C1-C2.

⁴ Joseph Alsop interview, originally televised on C-SPAN, November 19, 1984, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?124869-1/joseph-alsop-interview>.

⁵ David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (1975; reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 449; David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 499.

⁶ Quoted in Alterman, “A Newsmaker in Every Sense of the Word.” See also “Warren Commission: Conversation with Joseph Alsop,” telephone conversation between President Lyndon B. Johnson and Alsop, recorded November 25, 1963, *WyzAnt Resources*, <http://www.wyzant.com/resources/lessons/history/hpol/lbj/warren/alsop>.

⁷ Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*, 530.

⁸ Joseph Alsop: "Matter of Fact: The Brand-New War," *The Washington Post and Times-Herald*, September 13, 1965, A21.

⁸ Joseph Alsop, "Courage of a President," *The Washington Post*, February 8, 1971, A18; James Reston, "Don't Ask, Just Listen," *The New York Times*, February 12, 1971, 37.

¹⁰ Auburn, *The Columnist*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73-75.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 84, 97-98.

¹⁴ Quoted. in Alterman, "A Newsmaker in Every Sense of the Word."

¹⁵ For critical discussions of the press's role in the second Iraq War, see W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Matt Carlson, *On the Condition of Anonymity: Unnamed Sources and the Battle for Journalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Murrey Jacobson, "Q&A: Pulitzer Prize Winner David Auburn on His New Play, 'The Columnist,'" *PBS Newshour*, April 25, 2012, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/blog/2012/04/qa-playwright-david-auburn-on-the-columnist.html>.

¹⁷ See, for example, David Barsamian, *Stenographers to Power* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage, 1992); Frank Rich, "All the President's Press," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/29/opinion/29rich.html>.

¹⁸ Jacobson, "Q&A: Pulitzer Prize Winner David Auburn."

¹⁹ Alterman, "A Newsmaker in Every Sense of the Word." See also Eric Alterman, "Out of Print: The Death and Life of the American Newspaper," *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/03/31/080331fa_fact_alterman?currentPage=all.