

"Patrilineal surnames," the Kasses conclude, "are, in truth, less a sign of paternal prerogative than of paternal duty and professed commitment, reinforced psychologi-

cally by gratifying the father's vanity in the perpetuation of his name and by offering this nominal incentive to do his duty both to mother and child."

PRESS & MEDIA

Race in the Newsroom

A Survey of Recent Articles

In September 1994, the *Washington Post* ran a gripping series of articles about a black Washington grandmother and her family. The daughter of North Carolina sharecroppers, Rosa Lee Cunningham along with six of her eight children had become mired in drug addiction and crime, while her other two offspring had not. In his intimately detailed articles, veteran reporter Leon Dash sought to understand how it was that these "children and grandchildren from migrant families" could take such divergent paths.

His brilliant reporting won Dash a Pulitzer Prize. But inside the *Post*, according to Ruth Shalit, an associate editor at the *New Republic* (Oct. 2, 1995), Dash's series dismayed many other black reporters, who worried that it tarnished the image of "the black community." They ostracized Dash.

Shalit's cover story about race at the *Post* created a sensation in the national news media. That was not surprising, perhaps, since, as she writes, newspapers across the nation in recent years have also embarked upon "a course of 'compensatory' or preferential minority hiring." The effort to be "inclusive" at some papers includes requirements for racial and ethnic "diversity" in the sources quoted in a story (see the *American Journalism Review*, Oct. 1995).

Shalit contends that the *Post*'s determined affirmative action efforts in hiring have fanned racial tensions in the newsroom. An internal 1993 report stated that many black reporters complain that they have to work harder than whites to get "good stories or challenging beats." Meanwhile, she says, many white staffers allege that affirmative action has resulted in the hiring of some incompetent reporters.

In her lengthy article, Shalit also contends that *Post* editors—in their search for "racially balanced news coverage"—have

compromised the traditional journalistic ideal of fearless truth-telling. "Aggressive coverage of the social pathologies at the heart of Washington's black underclass . . . has increasingly given way to human-interest puffery," she claims. And because of racial oversensitivity on the part of editors, she charges, the *Post* has pulled its punches on various stories.

Shalit also argues that the *Post*'s affirmative action effort "to mirror the 32.3 percent of blacks and Hispanics in metropolitan Washington itself seems flamboyantly unrealistic." (Eighteen percent of the staff today are minorities.) After all, she observes, blacks and Hispanics make up only 10.6 percent of "the available pool" of college graduates, and only a fraction of even that small group goes into journalism.

In a subsequent issue of the *New Republic* (Oct. 16, 1995), *Post* executive editor Leonard Downie Jr. and publisher Donald Graham emit howls of outrage. "We have not adjusted standards in any way in our hiring of dozens of talented journalists of color who do distinguished work," Downie insists. The *Post*'s goal for nine years, he says, has been to have half of its new "hires" be women, and one-fourth minorities, "consistent with filling every vacancy with the best-qualified person possible." Since that goal was set, he says, the *Post* has hired 330 journalists, of whom 46 percent were women, 29.6 percent were minorities—and 37 percent were white men.

Shalit's piece contains a good many errors, some trivial, some not (she wrongly said an aide to a local political figure had served time in prison). Downie also notes that accusations of plagiarism (honest mistakes, she says) have been lodged against her in the recent past.

"At 25, just a few years out of Princeton,

and without a single daily newspaper story under her belt," observes John Cloud, editor of the *Washington City Paper* (Oct. 20, 1995), Shalit is writing major stories for national publications. That fact, he notes, seems to reflect "the current mores of magazine journalism, which is often more interested in forceful wording and fluid writing than spick-and-span reporting."

Despite Shalit's mistakes, it is apparent she struck a nerve. Are there enough minority journalists to satisfy industry-wide affirmative action plans without sacrificing qual-

ity? "That's hard to tell," Downie says, in an interview with Alicia C. Shepard, a contributing writer for the *American Journalism Review* (Dec. 1995), though for the *Post*, standing "at the top of the food chain," talent is not a problem.

The controversy sparked by Shalit's article does, however, lend support to one of her points: "By focusing obsessively on the ideals and the instruments of diversity, by exhorting its staff to reflect endlessly on their own resentments, the *Post* is ensuring that the resentments will never be transcended."

Who Lost Vietnam?

"Vietnam in Retrospect" by Peter Braestrup, in *Forbes MediaCritic* (Fall 1995), P.O. Box 762, Bedminster, N.J. 07921.

For nearly three decades, many critics—and many champions—of the press have insisted that the news media, particularly TV news, turned Americans against the Vietnam War. Not so, contends Braestrup, a former Saigon bureau chief for the *Washington Post* and author of *Big Story* (rev. ed., 1994), a study of Vietnam news coverage.

"TV folk saw their nightly, two-minute reports as the ultimate act of truth-telling," bringing the grisly reality of war into the nation's living rooms, he notes. But a study by media specialist Lawrence Lichty of Northwestern University found that out of more than 2,300 network evening news reports from Vietnam between August 1965 and August 1970, only 76 showed heavy fighting, with dead or wounded visible.

For two years after the U.S. troop build-up began in 1965, according to Lichty's analysis, network TV reporting was, on the whole, favorable to the American effort. "After that, coverage began to shift," Braestrup says—a change that reflected the "growing political discord at home." News reports increasingly questioned whether the U.S. venture would ultimately succeed.

But scholars have found no convincing evidence that TV war coverage had any spe-

cial impact on public opinion at home, Braestrup points out. In the 1950-53 Korean War, there was press censorship and no TV coverage, yet the slow decline in public support that occurred then, apparently in response to lengthening casualty lists, was roughly the same as the falloff in mass support over a comparable period during the Vietnam War.

Television portrayed Hanoi's surprise Tet offensive in January 1968 as a calamity for the U.S.-South Vietnamese side, when in fact it turned into a grave military setback for Hanoi. But "the 'disaster' portrait painted by television, and too slowly corrected by print, did not cause the disarray in Washington," Braestrup says. "In the absence of presidential leadership and after years of White House ambiguity and claims of 'progress,' LBJ's political crisis was a self-inflicted wound."

Indeed, during Hanoi's massive tank-led Easter offensive four years later, there was "no quick rush to judgment" by correspondents. President Richard Nixon, "no media favorite, responded with decisive actions—sending ships and aircraft, mining Haiphong harbor, bombing North Vietnam, making a new conditional peace offer. He took charge and gave shape to the story." It was the nation's political leaders, not the press, who wrote the U.S. script during America's longest war.

