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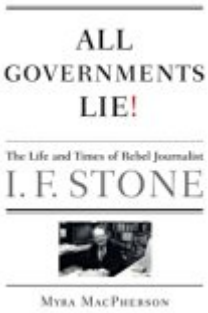
Myra MacPherson. *All Governments Lie! The Life and Times of Rebel Journalist I. F. Stone.* New York: Scribner, 2006. 564 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-684-80713-3.



Reviewed by Matthew Dallek

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In 1992, historian Robert C. Cottrell published the first full biography of journalist I. F. Stone, *Izzy: A Biography of I.F. Stone*, in which he praised Stone's criticism of U.S. Cold War policy and dubbed him an American original. That same year, a former Soviet agent declared that Stone had performed favors for the KGB during the Cold War, and Stone's critics began describing him as a traitor. In 2003, conservative columnist Robert Novak complained on CNN that "Stone received secret payments from the Kremlin" (quoted, p. 311) and, more recently in a review in the *New York Times*, the author Paul Berman argued that Stone was "a totalitarian." In response, journalists like Eric Alterman charged in the *American Prospect Online* and elsewhere that Berman's allegations were false and defended Stone as a champion for progressive causes.

Myra MacPherson, a former reporter for the *Washington Post* and author of three previous books, shares Alterman's regard for Stone, and *All Governments Lie! The Life and Times of Rebel Journalist I. F. Stone* is in part a rebuke of Stone's critics. MacPherson successfully rebuts allegations that Stone was a spy, interviewing the former KGB agent, who more or less retracted his allegations, and discussing FBI files on Stone that failed to implicate him. Most importantly, MacPherson suggests that the key question about Stone is not whether he was a spy. Rather, it is how did he manage to shape American political life and media in the 1940s and 1950s (decades inhospitable to radical ideas) and retain his relevance during the turmoil of the 1960s and beyond?

MacPherson makes clear that Stone was always a bit of an outcast. As a boy growing up in largely Republican, Protestant Haddonfield, New Jersey, in the 1910s, Stone wore "funny-looking glasses" and viewed himself as a "short, little Jew" (p. 12), while classmates considered him socially awkward. Stone encountered radical political doctrines through books, and socialists like writer Jack London and politician Eugene Debs were among his earliest heroes. Stone's father had escaped czarist Russia and ran a dry-goods emporium; and Stone, who identified with the disadvantaged as a youth, "became a young radical" (p. 25).

He admired not only Karl Marx's critique of capitalism's excesses, but also Thomas Jefferson's unbending commitment to individual liberty and freedom of speech and freedom of the press (pp. 38-39).

When Stone was thirteen, he met Jill Lit Stern, a department store heiress, and her husband became Stone's journalistic patron. In 1922, the fourteen-year-old Stone began publishing his newspaper, the *Progress* and later became a stringer for various local New Jersey newspapers. He attended the University of Pennsylvania before dropping out and going to work for Stern's husband at the *Philadelphia Record*, where Stone, at twenty-three, "became America's youngest chief editorial writer on a major newspaper" (pp. 60). By the mid-1930s, Stone had married, become a father, moved to New York, and was running the then-liberal *New York Post*'s editorial page. Stone frequently called attention to workers' Depression-era hardships and provided a minority voice in the media when he defended Franklin Roosevelt's 1937 court-packing plan as a necessary counterweight to an anti-New Deal Supreme Court (p. 104).

He later became a correspondent and columnist for other liberal publications, including the *Nation* and New York's *PM* daily, writing exposes and reporting from Europe and the Middle East. MacPherson makes a good case for Stone's prescience on certain key issues. Stone foresaw in the early 1930s that Hitler was a "danger to Europe and the world" (p. 135). He attacked Roosevelt for not saving Germany's Jewish population (p. 150), called isolationism "a classroom solution" in the late 1930s, and recorded the plight of Jewish refugees traveling to Palestine in 1946 (p. 161).

But *PM* (having been renamed the *Star*) folded in 1949. The *Daily Compass*, a leftist successor to *PM*, had hired Stone but closed down in 1952, and Stone was forced to make his own path (pp. 262-263). That a journalist of his caliber could not find a new home with a progressive media institution suggests the paucity of such publications in the aftermath of World War II. So, in 1953, with U.S. troops fighting a war on the Korean peninsula, Stone launched a newsweekly that he and his wife, Esther, self-published from their home in a middle-class Washington, D.C., suburban neighborhood.

I. F. Stone's Weekly provided an alternative viewpoint on politics and policy during the early Cold War. Like William F. Buckley's *National Review* (founded in 1955), countless activists, journalists, and politicians came to consider *I. F. Stone's Weekly* must-reading for three reasons. First, Stone was a savvy marketer of his own newsletter. He lured new readers by offering subscription specials, promoted the *Weekly* at every opportunity, and raised the broadsheet's profile by turning himself into almost a media brand by giving speeches, publishing books, and appearing on "Meet the Press" in the late 1940s. Second, Stone was an extremely able reporter with an enormous capacity for hard work. He attended countless news conferences, interviewed mid-level government officials, pored over pages of congressional testimony and other documents, and uncovered information that the mainstream press glided over or did not report on. By melding his capacity for observation with his political convictions, Stone combined elements from the careers of foreign correspondent Harrison Salisbury and muckraker Lincoln Steffens--reporters who, as sociologist Michael Schudson notes in *The Power of News* (1995), "define the range of possibilities to which a journalism of dedication and vision can aspire" (p. 109).

Third, and most importantly, *I. F. Stone's Weekly* (which had 70,000 subscribers by 1971, its final year) distinguished itself as an alternative progressive voice in a fairly conventional media age. Journalists are quoted in MacPherson's book as saying that although they disagreed with Stone's political slant, they enjoyed his subversive wit and amusing style, and considered his *Weekly*

a fresh, exciting publication. Reporters, politicians, and citizens embraced *I. F. Stone's Weekly* as a guilty pleasure. Stone "crusade[d] against such injustices as not being able to confront an accuser, flagrant wiretapping invasions of privacy, attacks on free speech, lifting passports, and deportation for political beliefs," MacPherson notes (p. 339). Stone's experiment succeeded because it was among the few hard-hitting forums for progressive protest at a time when such outlets were in short supply.

During the 1960s, Stone became a full-fledged hero to New Left activists who viewed him as a prescient rebel. Stone had defended civil rights in the 1940s, denounced the Korean War, and predicted in the early 1960s that U.S. involvement in Vietnam would be calamitous. The U.S. government meanwhile viewed Stone as a security threat, and MacPherson sheds new light on the FBI's nearly four-decades-long trailing of Stone. Agents obsessively tracked Stone's movements, characterized his friends as collaborators, and unsuccessfully attempted to tar him as a Russian agent. The time, manpower, and resources that FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover devoted to monitoring a bumptious critic like Stone is staggering, and MacPherson--drawing upon thousands of pages of FBI memos-- captures in rich historical detail the extent to which Stone was being pursued.

MacPherson also demonstrates that Stone--as he once said of himself--was "a socialist by conviction ... but an individualist by temperament," not, at bottom, a consistent Communist or a Russian agent (p. 38). Stone had served as an elected official in the New Jersey Socialist Party in his youth, but it was the only time that he had held an elected political office (p. 69). Throughout his career, Stone valued his "independence" (p. 63), worried that he would become "too close" to political organizations (p. 101), and considered himself a zealous defender of individual liberties.

MacPherson acknowledges that Stone was myopic in his defense of Stalin's regime until breaking away after he visited the Soviet Union in 1956 (p. 349). Stone dogmatically gave Russian Communists the benefit of the doubt long after the Soviet Union's show trials, mass murders, and brutal occupation of Eastern Europe had become common knowledge, and he sometimes was sympathetic to Castro's Cuban regime (p. 383). But Stone's career hinged less on the Communist question than on his identity as a reporter with a fiercely independent streak who believed that the U.S. government repressed civil liberties through McCarthyism and practiced a misleading foreign policy. Stone believed that the American media also failed to hold government officials accountable for deceptive practices. Among those on the left who believed that the government had unnecessarily engaged in a nuclear arms race and violated civil liberties and civil rights, Stone developed a following in the early period of the Cold War and support for Stone has continued long after his death in 1989.

Though detailed and deeply researched, MacPherson's biography too often reads like a paean to Stone. MacPherson often depicts Stone's critics as "outrageous" wing-nuts (pp. 287, 311) or misguided cowards, while portraying Stone as a brilliant reporter brimming with energy, idealism, and uncanny insights. Such Manichean portraits of Stone and his enemies are too one-sided and hagiographic. Indeed, this biography lacks the nuance and balanced assessments found in biographies of other mid-twentieth-century journalists including John B. Judis's fair-minded *William F. Buckley Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (1988) and Ronald Steel's classic study *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (1980).

There are other problems as well. The biography at times presents a confusing, jumbled chronicle of dates and events. It includes lengthy sections on sweeping political developments without always explaining their specific connection to Stone's journalism. Such overviews of the political landscape are not particularly illuminating, and a

more detailed discussion of the media world out of which Stone emerged would have made this book more original.

Despite these flaws, however, MacPherson's *All Governments Lie!* shows Stone as an influential media and political critic who was not afraid to buck popular opinion. Stone demonstrated how difficult it was for progressive voices to be heard in mainstream media and American politics and what it took to succeed. That Stone achieved such a hearing speaks to his abilities as a stylist, investigative reporter, Cold War radical, polemicist, and publicist. It suggests as well that there has indeed been room in the history of the American media for partisan publications like *National Review* and *I. F. Stone's Weekly*--and the current debate over Stone and communism provides more evidence that voices of media dissent on both left and right will be heard for years to come.

Note

[1]. *New York Times* , October 1, 2006.

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