H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert B. Davies. *Baldwin of the "Times": Hanson W. Baldwin, a Military Journalist's Life, 1903-1991.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011. x + 399 pp. $32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61251-048-4.

Reviewed by Christina Smith (CSU Channel Islands)
Published on Jhistory (January, 2013)
Commissioned by Heidi Tworek

Robert B. Davies' book is an insightfully written and meticulously researched account of one military journalist. Davies provides a thorough overview of Hanson W. Baldwin's life, focusing on the defining moments in his career and his guiding philosophies about American power and journalistic responsibility. As the military reporter for the nation's flagship newspaper, the *New York Times*, for almost his entire career, Baldwin recorded, analyzed, and reported the greatest events in twentieth-century U.S. history. His first assignments came about as the United States was gearing up to participate in World War II. After spending the war reporting from various fronts, he returned home and traced the development of nuclear weapons and the unfolding Cold War. It was during this time of antagonistic government-press relations that his views about the necessity of a free press were cemented. These views were increasingly challenging to uphold, as subsequent administrations became more secretive and controlling of information and imagery. Baldwin's confrontation with governmental secrecy came to a head in the 1960s, when J. Edgar Hoover investigated him for leaking government secrets. Nevertheless, Baldwin remained critical during the Vietnam War and ended his illustrious career as a well-regarded journalist.

The first part of Davies' book describes Baldwin's upbringing as a well-educated, thoughtful, if not slightly self-conscious young man. His father was also a newspaperman and advised his son against pursuing the career. Instead, Baldwin entered the navy, which would influence his career immensely. He never seemed to forget his years in the navy, not only through a love of travel and adventure, but also through a fundamental understanding of military affairs. Most intriguing in the early part of his career was his designation as the official military reporter for the *New York Times.* He expanded his knowledge base about other military branches, cultivated contacts in the United States and abroad, and honed his writing skills in a variety of formats. Additionally, the reader sees his views about the role of the press in a democratic society begin to take shape. Indeed, his reasoned decision to keep his civilian and military selves separate in executing his assignments would follow him through several military engagements.

The most intriguing material, both journalistically and militarily, comes in the middle of the book in a discussion of Baldwin's coverage of World War II. Davies provides the reader with exceptional detail about Baldwin's travels, interactions, opinions, and strategic decisions (many of which turned out to be quite misguided, while still others were remarkably accurate). Baldwin offered numerous reports about the conflict in Europe, Africa, and the Pacific. He was not afraid to criticize the military establishment, especially its lack of preparation and weaponry, as well as the strict division between grunts and brass, a division he felt ultimately contributed to lower morale. In addition to his work at the *Times*, he wrote longer analytical pieces for magazines. These pieces often included information about geography, military positions, and armor and artillery of U.S. and Axis powers. As a result, Baldwin received criticism from both military leaders and the public, who believed he divulged too much material or was too favorable in his coverage of the enemy's successes. Nevertheless, his World War II reporting career was celebrated–he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of Guadalcanal and was offered a prestigious position on board the USS *Augusta* during the D-Day invasion of Normandy. The middle portion of the book ends with a discussion of the atomic bomb. Notably, Baldwin saw many problems with the use of the weapon both in the United States and by other countries. He foresaw the Cold War and the armaments race long before it officially began–a concern he carried to the end of his life.

Section 3 of the book discusses his life after World War II, when he returned to the United States and became a well-regarded analyst of military weaponry, capability,

and strategy during the Cold War. His in-depth criticism of U.S. military and foreign policy led him to become a controversial figure. Adversaries included all the major names in the Kennedy administration: Robert Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and the aforementioned Hoover. Davies spends an entire chapter describing the witch hunt undertaken by Hoover after Baldwin criticized the secretary of defense publicly. It seemed as though this incident only reinforced Baldwin's strong views on the centrality of a free press in times of war and conflict. The last major war covered by Baldwin was the U.S. engagement in Vietnam. Here, Baldwin's pro-military attitude contrasted sharply with the minimalist approach of the Johnson administration, the *Times*' editors, and American society. Baldwin spent the last several years of his career writing about the need for escalated military action and a resolute and patient U.S. society. Negative societal attitudes toward the military, in concert with "the abandonment of Adolph Ochs' standards of accuracy, fairness, and balance, to be replaced by the new standards of profitability, readability, and entertainment" at the *Times* led Baldwin to retire in 1968 (p. 303).

In the end, Davies' book offers readers a rich biography of one of journalism's legendary figures. What emerges is a portrait of a complex man–well educated but decidedly anti-intellectual; highly conservative in his outlook on social issues, but consistently willing to challenge government censorship; pro-military but dedicated to always questioning the institution's strategy and preparedness. Though he did not receive the notoriety of Walter Cronkite or Ernie Pyle, Baldwin was a central character in U.S. journalism throughout the twentieth century. More notably, many of the happenings that formed Baldwin's personal and professional life are currently occurring, granted in a different manner. Baldwin obtained his first position just days before the stock market crash, and he came up as a journalist amid the depression. He saw a decidedly antiwar attitude shape his fellow citizens and a government more focused on economic issues. He covered unpopular wars and witnessed a growing cynicism toward government among the U.S. populace. He experienced changing social views about the media and investigative journalism. He saw the rise of public relations, news management, and hostility between the military/government and the press. Through it all, he held firm in his belief that an independent, investigative press was fundamental to a democracy. Thus, his story is important for scholars interested in the shifting focus and mission of the journalistic enterprise, especially in times of war. While Davies' book offers an in-depth view of one journalist's life, what is most relevant are the numerous implicit themes about American society, war, conflict, journalism, and free speech–themes that are still debated and valued today.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Christina Smith. Review of Davies, Robert B., *Baldwin of the "Times": Hanson W. Baldwin, a Military Journalist's Life, 1903-1991.* Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37062

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.