

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your

colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for

samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

November 25, 2011

Tom Wicker, Times Journalist, Dies at 85

By ROBERT D. McFADDEN

Tom Wicker, one of postwar America's most distinguished journalists, who wrote 20 books, covered the assassination of President John F. Kennedy for The New York Times and became the paper's Washington bureau chief and an iconoclastic political columnist for 25 years, died on Friday at his home near Rochester, Vt. He was 85.

The cause was apparently a heart attack, said his wife, Pamela Wicker.

On Nov. 22, 1963, Mr. Wicker, a brilliant but relatively unknown White House correspondent who had worked at four smaller papers, written several novels under a pen name and, at 37, had established himself as a workhorse of The Times's Washington bureau, was riding in the presidential motorcade as it wound through downtown Dallas, the lone Times reporter on a routine political trip to Texas.

The searing images of that day — the rifleman's shots cracking across Dealey Plaza, the wounded president lurching forward in the open limousine, the blur of speed to Parkland Memorial Hospital and the nation's anguish as the doctors gave way to the priests and a new

era — were dictated by Mr. Wicker from a phone booth in stark, detailed prose drawn from notes scribbled on a White House itinerary sheet. It filled two front-page columns and the entire second page, and vaulted the writer to journalistic prominence overnight.

Nine months later, Mr. Wicker, the son of a small-town North Carolina railroad conductor, succeeded the legendary James B. Reston as chief of The Times's 48-member Washington bureau, and two years later he inherited the column — although hardly the mantle — of the retiring Arthur Krock, the dean of Washington pundits, who had covered every president since Calvin Coolidge.

In contrast to the conservative pontificating of Mr. Krock and the genteel journalism of Mr. Reston, Mr. Wicker brought a hard-hitting Southern liberal/civil libertarian's perspective to his column, "In the Nation," which appeared on the editorial page and then on the Op-Ed Page two or three times a week from 1966 until his retirement in 1991. It was also syndicated to scores of newspapers.

Riding waves of change as the effects of the divisive war in Vietnam and America's civil rights struggle swept the country, Mr. Wicker applauded President Lyndon B. Johnson and Congress for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but took the president to task for deepening the American involvement in Southeast Asia.

He denounced President Richard M. Nixon for covertly bombing Cambodia, and in the Watergate scandal accused him of creating the "beginnings of a police state." Nixon put Mr. Wicker on his "enemies list," but resigned in disgrace over the Watergate cover-up. Vice President Spiro T. Agnew upbraided Mr. Wicker for "irresponsibility and thoughtlessness," but he, too, resigned after pleading no contest to evading taxes on bribes he had taken while he was governor of Maryland.

The Wicker judgments fell like a hard rain upon all the presidents: Gerald R. Ford, for continuing the war in Vietnam; Jimmy Carter, for “temporizing” in the face of soaring inflation and the Iranian hostage crisis; Ronald Reagan, for dozing through the Iran-contra scandal, and the elder George Bush, for letting the Persian Gulf war outweigh educational and health care needs at home. Mr. Wicker’s targets also included members of Congress, government secrecy, big business, corrupt labor leaders, racial bigots, prison conditions, television and the news media.

In the 1970s, Mr. Wicker, whose status as a columnist put him outside the customary journalistic restrictions on advocacy, became a fixture on current-events television shows and addressed gatherings on college campuses and in other forums. Speaking at a 1971 “teach-in” at Harvard, he urged students to “engage in civil disobedience” in protesting the war in Vietnam. “We got one president out,” he told the cheering crowd, “and perhaps we can do it again.”

A Prison Uprising

Mr. Wicker had many detractors. He was attacked by conservatives and liberals, by politicians high and low, by business interests, labor leaders and others, and for a time his activism — crossing the line from observer to participant in news events — put him in disfavor with many mainstream journalists. But his speeches and columns continued unabated.

His most notable involvement took place during the uprising by 1,300 inmates who seized 38 guards and workers at the Attica prison in upstate New York in September 1971. Having written a sympathetic column on the death of the black militant George Jackson at San Quentin, Mr. Wicker was asked by Attica’s rebels to join a group of outsiders to inspect prison conditions and monitor negotiations between inmates and officials. The radical lawyer William

M. Kunstler and Bobby Seale, chairman of the Black Panther Party, also went in, and the observers took on the role of mediators.

Mr. Wicker, in a column, described a night in the yard with the rebels: flickering oil-drum fires, bull-necked convicts armed with bats and iron pipes, faceless men in hoods or football helmets huddled on mattresses behind wooden barricades. He wrote: “This is another world — terrifying to the outsider, yet imposing in its strangeness — behind those massive walls, in this murmurous darkness, within the temporary but real power of desperate men.”

Talks broke down over inmate demands for amnesty and the ouster of [Russell G. Oswald](#), the state corrections commissioner. Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller rejected appeals by the observers to go to Attica, and after a four-day standoff, troopers and guards stormed the prison. Ten hostages and 29 inmates were killed by the authorities’ gunfire in what witnesses called a turkey shoot; three inmates were killed by other convicts, who also beat a guard to death. Afterward, many prisoners were beaten and abused in reprisals.

Mr. Wicker wrote a book about the uprising, “A Time to Die” (1975). Most critics hailed it as his best book, although some chided him for sympathizing with the inmates. “Attica,” a television movie starring Morgan Freeman as a jailhouse lawyer and George Grizzard as Mr. Wicker, was made by ABC in 1980.

Fiction and Nonfiction

Mr. Wicker produced a shelf of books: 10 novels, ranging from potboilers under the pen name [Paul Connolly](#) to murder mysteries and political thrillers, and 10 nonfiction books that re-examined the legacies of ex-presidents, race relations in America, the press and other subjects.

Mr. Wicker’s first nonfiction book was “Kennedy Without Tears: The Man Beneath the

Myth” (1964), a 61-page look back that some critics said recapitulated popular notions of an orator of charm and wit but did not penetrate the armor of sentiment growing over the dead president.

“JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality Upon Politics,” (1968), was better received. It analyzed the character of the two presidents to explain why Kennedy was unable to push many programs through Congress and why Johnson’s credibility was a casualty of the Vietnam conflict.

Mr. Wicker’s “On Press” (1978) enlarged on complaints he had made for years: the myth of objectivity, reliance on official and anonymous sources. Far from being robust and uninhibited, he wrote, the press was often a toady to government and business.

Published shortly before Mr. Wicker retired, “One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream” (1991) offered a surprising reassessment of the president he had scorned 20 years earlier. Nixon, credited with high marks in foreign policy, mainly for opening doors to China, actually deserved more notice for domestic achievements, Mr. Wicker argued, especially in desegregating Southern schools.

Mr. Wicker later wrote “Tragic Failure: Racial Integration in America,” (1996), arguing that black Americans should abandon the Democratic Party and forge a new liberal movement. And he produced “On the Record: An Insider’s Guide to Journalism” (2001), “Dwight D. Eisenhower” (2002), “George Herbert Walker Bush” (2004) and “Shooting Star: The Brief Arc of Joe McCarthy” (2006).

His political novel “Facing the Lions” (1973) was on The Times best-seller list for 18 weeks. His later novels were “Unto This Hour” (1984), a Civil War story on the best-seller list for 15 weeks; “Donovan’s Wife” (1992), a satire on sleazy politics; and “Easter Lilly” (1998), about a black

woman tried for the murder of a white jail guard in the South.

A Young Journalist

Mr. Wicker was a hefty man, 6 feet 2 inches tall, with a ruddy face, jowls, petulant lips and a lock of unruly hair that dangled boyishly on a high forehead. He toiled in tweeds in pinstriped Washington, but seemed more suited to a hammock and straw hat on a lazy summer day. The casual gait, the easygoing manner, the down-home drawl set a tone for audiences, but masked a fiery temperament, a ferocious work ethic, a tigerish competitiveness and a stubborn idealism, qualities that made him a perceptive observer of the American scene for more than a half century.

Thomas Grey Wicker was born on June 18, 1926, in Hamlet, N.C., the son of Delancey David, a railroad freight conductor, and Esta Cameron Wicker. He worked on his high school newspaper and decided to make journalism his career.

After Navy service in World War II, he studied journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, graduating in 1948. Over the next decade, he was an editor and reporter at several newspapers in North Carolina, including The Winston-Salem Journal, eventually becoming its Washington correspondent.

Mr. Wicker married the former Neva Jewett McLean in 1949. The couple had two children and were divorced in 1973. In 1974, he married Pamela Hill, a producer of television documentaries. Besides his wife, he is survived by the children of his first marriage, a daughter, Cameron Wicker, and a son, Thomas Grey Wicker Jr.; two stepdaughters, Kayce Freed Jennings and Lisa Freed; and a stepson, Christopher Hill.

In Washington

In 1957-58, Mr. Wicker was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, and in 1959 became associate editor of The Nashville Tennessean. In 1960, Mr. Reston hired him for The Times's Washington bureau, one of "Scotty's boys," a cadre of protégés that included Max Frankel, Anthony Lewis and Russell Baker.

Mr. Wicker covered Congress and the Kennedy White House, the 1960 political campaigns and presidential trips abroad. His output was prodigious — 700 articles in his first few years, many of them on the front page, others in the form of news analysis in The New York Times Magazine or the Week in Review.

His work was often entertaining as well as informative. "The most familiar voice in Ameriker lahst yeeah warz that of a Boston Irishman with Harvard overtones who sounded vaguely like an old recording of Franklin D. Roosevelt speeded up to 90 r.p.m.'s," Mr. Wicker wrote for the magazine, summing up 241 Kennedy speeches in his first year in the presidency. "Nor will the Beacon Street 'a' and the Bunker Hill 'r' fall any less frequently on the American eeah in the coming yeeah."

Mr. Wicker was named chief of the Washington bureau on Sept. 1, 1964, at the insistence of his mentor, Mr. Reston, who had asked to be relieved. While the job involved managerial duties, Mr. Wicker was an indifferent administrator. He continued to cover Washington and national news, and to write news analyses and magazine articles. In 1966, he took on Mr. Krock's column, adding to his workload.

In 1968, after complaints by Times editors in New York that Mr. Wicker was devoting too much attention to his writing, The Times announced that James Greenfield, a former Time magazine reporter and State Department official, would replace him as bureau chief.

Mr. Wicker and some colleagues, who saw the move as an effort to rein in the relative independence the bureau had enjoyed under Mr. Reston, vehemently opposed the appointment. The publisher, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, withdrew Mr. Greenfield's name and named Mr. Frankel as bureau chief. Mr. Wicker became associate editor, a title he retained until his retirement, and after 1972 wrote his column from New York.

Besides columns and books, Mr. Wicker wrote short stories and freelance articles that appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *Life*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone* and *Vogue*. He received many awards and honorary degrees from a dozen universities.



More in U.S. (1 of 22 articles)

OPEN

Rough Times Take Bloom Off a New Year's Rite, the Rose Parade

[Read More »](#)

MONTPELIER, VT.â€”Tom Wicker, the former New York Times political reporter and columnist whose career soared following his acclaimed coverage of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, died Friday at his home in Rochester, Vermont. He was 85. Wicker died after an apparent heart attack Friday morning, his wife Pamela said. â€œHeâ€™d been ill with things that come from being 85,â€ she said. â€œHe died in his bedroom looking out at the countryside that he loved.â€ Wicker grew up in poverty in Hamlet, North Carolina, and wanted to be a novelist, but pursued journalism when his early books didnâ€™t cat Tom Wicker, the New York Times reporter who covered the assassination of President John F. Kennedy for the paper before moving on to become the Times' Washington bureau chief and a columnist for 25 years, died at his Rochester, Vermont, home on Friday, the Times reports. According to his wife Pamela, Wicker died of an apparent heart attack. He was 85. Wicker was in the presidential motorcade on Nov. 22, 1963, when Kennedy was shot. His coverage of the assassination catapulted him to prominence in the journalistic field. Less than a year later, See full article at The Wrap Â». Tom Wicker was a relatively unknown White House correspondent until his moving and dramatic eyewitness coverage of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, caused his.â€ Introducing Times RadioTap â€”Menuâ€™ and then â€”Times Radioâ€™ to listen to the latest well-informed debate, expert analysis and breaking newsTap â€”Menuâ€™ and then â€”Times Radioâ€™ to listen to the latest well-informed debate, expert analysis and breaking news. Dismiss. Accessibility Links.