

no imitators. Other journalists may envy what he did, but in a business where imitation is the sincerest form of self-promotion, Baker broke his own mold. He was, simply and utterly, *sui generis*.

This made him, in the cozy and self-congratulatory world of journalists, odd man out. His colleagues and competitors may have admired and respected him, but few understood him. While they chased around after ephemeral scoops and basked in the reflected glory of the famous and powerful, Baker wrote what he once called 'a casual column without anything urgent to tell humanity,' about aspects of life that journalists commonly regard as beneath what they fancy to be their dignity. Looking back to the column's beginnings, Baker once wrote:

'At the Times in those days the world was pretty much confined to Washington news, national news and foreign news. Being ruled off those turfs seemed to leave nothing very vital to write about, and I started calling myself the Times' nothing columnist. I didn't realize at first that it was a wonderful opportunity to do a star turn. Freed from the duty to dilate on the global predicament of the day, I could build a grateful audience among readers desperate for relief from the Times' famous gravity.'

That is precisely what he did. As he noticed in his valedictory column, Baker's years as a gumshoe reporter immunized him from 'columnists' tendency to spend their time with life's winners and to lead lives of isolation from the less dazzling American realities.' Instead of writing self-important thumb-suckers—'The Coming Global Malaise,' 'Nixon's Southern Strategy,' 'Whither Cyprus?'—he concentrated on ordinary life as lived by ordinary middle-class Americans in the second half of the 20th century. He wrote about shopping at the supermarket, about car breakdowns and mechanics who failed to remedy them, about television and what it told us about ourselves, about children growing up and parents growing older.

Quite surely it is because Baker insisted on writing about all this stuff that failed to meet conventional definitions of 'news' that not until 1979 did his fellow journalists get around to giving him the Pulitzer Prize for commentary. Probably, too, it is because he insisted on being amused by the passing scene and writing about in an amusing way. He was only occasionally laugh-out-loud amusing in the manner of Dave Barry—who is now, with Baker's retirement, the one genuinely funny writer in American newspapers—but he was always witty and wry, and he possessed a quality of which I am in awe: an ability to ingratiate himself with readers while at the same time making the most mordant judgments on their society and culture.

There were times in the late years of his column when mordancy seemed to hover at the edge of bitterness. This struck me as inexplicable, but the inner life of another person is forever a mystery, and in any event there is much in *fin de siècle* America about which to be bitter. But mostly Baker dealt in his stock in trade: common-sensical wisdom, wry skepticism, transparent decency. He wasn't just the best newspaper writer around, he was one of the best writers around. Period.

[From the New York Times, December 25, 1998]

A FEW WORDS AT THE END  
(By Russell Baker)

Since it is Christmas, a day on which nobody reads a newspaper anyhow, and since this is the last of these columns titled 'Observer' which have been appearing in The Times since 1962, I shall take the otherwise

inexcusable liberty of talking about me and newspapers. I love them.

I have loved them since childhood when my Uncle Allen regularly brought home Hearst's New York Journal-American with its wonderful comics, Burriss Jenkins cartoons and tales of rich playboys, murderous playgirls and their love nests. At that age I hadn't a guess about what a love nest might be, and didn't care, and since something about 'love nest' sounded curiously illegal, I never asked an adult for edification.

On Sunday's Uncle Allen always brought The New York Times and read himself to sleep with it. Such a dismal mass of gray paper was of absolutely no interest to me. It was Katzenjammer Kids and Maggie and Jiggs of the King Features syndicate with whom I wanted to spend Sunday.

At my friend Harry's house I discovered the New York tabloids. Lots of great pictures. Dick Tracy! Plenty of stories about condemned killers being executed, with emphasis what they had eaten for their last meal, before walking—the last mile! The tabloids left me enthralled by the lastness of things.

Inevitably, I was admitted to practice the trade, and I marveled at the places newspapers could take me. They took metro to suburbs on sunny Saturday afternoons to witness the mortal results of family quarrels in households that kept pistols. They took me to hospital emergency rooms to listen to people die and to ogle nurses.

They took me to the places inhabited by the frequently unemployed and there taught me the smell of poverty. In winter there was also the smell of deadly kerosene stoves used for heating, though there tendency to set bedrooms on fire sent the morgue a predictable stream of customers every season.

The memory of those smells has been a valuable piece of equipment during my career as a columnist. Columnists' tendency to spend their time with life's winners and to lead lives of isolation from the less dazzling American realities makes it too easy for us sometimes to solve the nation's problems in 700 words.

Newspapers have taken me into the company of the great as well as the greatly celebrated. On these expeditions I have sat in the Elysee Palace and gazed on the grandeur that was Charles de Gaulle speaking as from Olympus. I have watched Nikita Khrushchev, fresh from terrifying Jack Kennedy inside a Vienna Embassy, emerge to clown with the press.

I have been apologized to by Richard Nixon. I have seen Adlai Stevenson, would-be President of the United States, shake hands with a department-store dummy in Florida.

I have been summoned on a Saturday morning to the Capitol of the United States to meet with Lyndon Johnson, clad in pajamas and urgently needing my advice on how to break a civil-rights filibuster. I have often been played for a fool like this by other interesting men and, on occasion, equally interesting women.

Pope John XXIII included me in an audience he granted the press group en route to Turkey, Iran and points east with President Eisenhower. The Pope's feet barely reached the floor and seemed to dance as he spoke.

Newspapers took me to Westminster Abbey in a rental white tie and topper to see Queen Elizabeth crowned and to Versailles in another rental white-tie-and-tails rig to share a theater evening with the de Gaulles and the John F. Kennedys.

Thanks to newspapers, I have made a four-hour visit to Afghanistan, have seen the Taj Mahal by moonlight, breakfasted at dawn on lamb and couscous while sitting by the marble pool of a Moorish palace in Morocco and one picked up a persistent family of fleas in the Balkans.

In Iran I have ridden in a press bus over several miles of Oriental carpets with which the Shah had ordered the street covered between airport and town to honor the visiting Eisenhower, a man who, during a White House news conference which I attended in shirtsleeves, once identified me as 'that man that's got the shirt on.'

I could go on and on, and probably will somewhere sometime, but the time for this enterprise is up. Thanks for listening for the past three million words.●

#### ROBERT DAVID SMITH

● Mr. COVERDELL. Mr. President, I rise today to commend Robert David Smith for his commitment to excellence in academics and as a citizen. Robert attended Gilmer High School in his hometown of Ellijay, Georgia. While in High School, Robert was named the Class of 1996 Valedictorian, 1996 USA Today All-Academic Team Scholar, winner of the 1994 National Seiko Youth Challenge, Georgia Scholar, National Merit Finalist, and Senior Class President. He also received the 1995 Governor's Proclamation, the 1995 and 1996 D.A.R. Good Citizen Award and the rank of Eagle Scout.

In college, Robert has continued his commitment to academic excellence. Attending Harvard University, Robert is in his Junior year majoring in Economics. He has made Dean's List and been named a Harvard College Scholar.

Robert's commitment to excellence has also been extended to the community. At home, he has served on the Gilmer County Comprehensive Planning Committee which analyzed its own environmental and financial problems. He also volunteered for the Cox Creek Project which worked to solve local sewage and landfill problems in Gilmer County. Finally, as a student at Harvard, Robert participates in the Park Street Project where he serves as a tutor at a local middle school, helping students excel.

Once again, Mr. President, I would like to thank Robert David Smith for his commitment to academic and civic excellence. As we in Congress discuss possible reforms of our educational system, certainly we can use Robert as a model for the type of student we should be producing in our Nation's schools.●

#### TRIBUTE TO LES CHITTENDEN

● Ms. MIKULSKI. Mr. President, I rise today to honor the contribution of an outstanding Marylander, Mr. Les Chittenden. I hope my colleagues will find inspiration in this story of devotion and persistence.

Les and his wife Mary lived in an apartment building in Columbia, Maryland where handicapped access and parking were limited. When Mary became ill and required the use of a wheelchair, the Chittendens discovered just how inadequate the handicapped facilities at their building were.

Mr. President, Les Chittenden was not content to simply accept the situation. He fought to change it. His devotion to his wife of 36 years motivated

him to take on the powers that be and propose solutions to make disabled residents safer each time they parked their car and entered the building. Even though agreeing on and implementing a solution proved to be difficult, Mr. Chittenden still refused to give up.

Five months after he began his fight to improve access for disabled residents, Les' beloved wife Mary passed away. Mr. President, I want to send my condolences to Mr. Chittenden and his family during this difficult time.

But, Mr. President, I also want to send my congratulations and my admiration. Shortly after his wife's passing, Mr. Chittenden returned home one weekend to find that his hard work paid off at last—a new handicapped ramp and several new handicapped parking spaces were added to the building as a result of his persistent efforts.

I want to share this story with my colleagues today because I think it's important that we honor the meaningful contributions of Americans like Les Chittenden. Mr. Chittenden is a wonderful example of how one person can make a valuable difference in our communities. Mr. Chittenden's story is an inspiration to us all.●

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#### TRIBUTE TO ROY SMITH

● Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I am pleased to bring to the attention of Senators the retirement of Roy Smith, the Deputy District Engineer for Programs and Project Management for the Vicksburg District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Mr. Smith has held several positions in the Vicksburg District, including serving as Chief of the Hydrology Section, Chief of the Hydrology Branch, and Chief of the Engineering Division.

He has served as Deputy District Engineer since 1989.

During his tenure, Mr. Smith has been of tremendous assistance to me, my staff, and the people of Mississippi. He has also been recognized within the Corps; receiving the Meritorious Civilian Service award and the Commander's Award for Civilian Service.

In November, the Delta Council of Mississippi passed a resolution honoring Mr. Smith on the occasion of his retirement which summarizes the contributions that Roy has made to our State of Mississippi with these words, "There has been no individual who has offered a greater contribution to the future of flood protection in the Mississippi Delta during the past quarter of a century than Roy Smith."

I know the Senate joins me in thanking Roy for his years of distinguished service and in offering our best wishes for his retirement.●