

# Radical Sheet

*What the short, rumbustious history of Ramparts magazine means for modern journalism.*

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**A BOMB IN EVERY ISSUE: HOW THE SHORT UNRULY LIFE OF RAMPARTS MAGAZINE CHANGED AMERICA** BY PETER RICHARDSON • NEW PRESS • 2009  
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ipping through *The New York Times* on the morning of February 16, 1966, a reader would have come across a startling photo: a stern-faced soldier, standing against a pitch-black backdrop, crowned by the bold declaration “I quit!” The soldier was Donald Duncan, a decorated Green Beret who had just returned from Vietnam. The small print announced Duncan’s opposition to the war after an 18-month tour. “I couldn’t kid myself any longer that my country was acting rationally, or even morally,” he said. But the photo wasn’t telling his story. It was selling it—it appeared in a full-page ad promoting the newest scoop from *Ramparts* magazine.

That wasn’t the first, and was hardly the last, of the Bay Area-based monthly’s provocations. In its brief and glorious heyday during the late 1960s, *Ramparts* produced a succession of images and stories that jumped out of newsstands and shook readers by the shoulders: four hands holding aloft burning draft cards; a portrait of Black Panther Huey P. Newton behind bars; an exhortation for more

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ELBERT VENTURA *is the managing editor of the Progressive Policy Institute.*

student uprisings and “two, three, many Columbias”; an all-American tyke holding the Viet Cong flag under the headline, “Alienation is when your country is at war and you want the other side to win.”

The magazine bloomed during a fertile period for radical media. Underground newspapers and leftist journals—the *Berkeley Barb*, the *Los Angeles Free Press*, *Viet-Report*, *Rat*—sprouted like wildflowers in the 1960s. But none of them were as big, as brash, or as influential as *Ramparts*. This was no austere newsletter that took pride in its obscurity. Its covers were as eye-catching and inventive as anything mainstream publishing produced. *Ramparts* was unrepentantly glossy, filled with ads (a no-no for some on the left), groundbreaking design, and a pop savvy that tempered the sting of its incisive critique. Warren Hinckle, the executive editor, proudly wrote of the influential *Ramparts* style:

“[B]y the late 1960s one could line up *Evergreen Review*, *Harper’s*, *Atlantic*, *New York* magazine, *Esquire* and *Ramparts* and be unable to tell the chicken from the egg.” By aping the look of the corporate media it mercilessly hammered, the magazine gave a sheen of mainstream legitimacy to radical ideas.

**In the postwar era’s most tumultuous decade, *Ramparts* became the slickest, smartest scrapbook of the zeitgeist.**

Considering that an entire continent’s worth of trees has been felled commemorating the ‘60s, it is something of a surprise that a proper history of *Ramparts* has never been published. Peter Richardson’s *A Bomb In Every Issue: How the Short Unruly Life of Ramparts Magazine Changed America* redresses that oversight. The editorial director of PoliPointPress, a publisher of progressive books, and author of a book on 1960s *Nation* editor Carey McWilliams, Richardson is steeped in the world of leftist ideas and journalism, and he ascribes an autobiographical dimension to his interest, noting that he grew up in the Bay Area and was marked at an early age by the very milieu that gave rise to *Ramparts*.

Richardson’s book offers a breezy, blow-by-blow account of the magazine’s short-lived existence. If anything, for those hungering for such a history, it might be a little too brisk—at a mere 227 pages including endnotes, the book whets one’s appetite for a longer, more immersive chronicle, not to mention an anthology of *Ramparts*’ best. But what’s here is choice. Relying heavily on two autobiographies by *Ramparts* editors—David Horowitz’s *Radical Son* and Hinckle’s *If You Have a Lemon, Make Lemonade*, a gonzo memoir that’s due for rediscovery—Richardson also includes material from recent interviews with many of the magazine’s principals to put in perspective its unlikely achievements.

Smart enough to get out of the way of a story that needs no embellishing, Richardson fills in the backdrop with convincing color, placing *Ramparts* firmly in its unique historical moment. The dramatis personae is a writer's dream: eccentric millionaires, Berkeley radicals, Black Panthers, a dipsomaniac editor. Richardson is a lucid and even clever writer (a nice touch: lyrics from "The Star Spangled Banner" are used as chapter titles, a nod to *Ramparts'* provenance). "If 1968 was the year America had a nervous breakdown, *Ramparts* was its most reliable fever chart," writes Richardson. (The chapter is aptly titled "Bombs Bursting in Air.") The line sums up *Ramparts'* importance in the story of American journalism. In the postwar era's most tumultuous decade, the magazine became the scrapbook of the zeitgeist. Richardson strains to make a case for *Ramparts'*—and his project's—relevance to today, but he need not try so hard. The magazine's singular brilliance and influence on its time more than qualify it for remembrance.

In recapitulating the story of *Ramparts*, it's striking how much its arc mirrors that of the New Left. The historian John Patrick Diggins wrote that "the New Left started in a spirit of moderation and ended calling for nothing less than revolution," and so it was with *Ramparts*, which went from impassioned reformist pleas for civil rights in the early '60s to rejectionist calls for American defeat in Vietnam by the end of the decade.

Founded by Edward Keating, a millionaire liberal, *Ramparts* began life as a Catholic intellectual journal, a platform from which Keating could engage the church in a high-minded discussion between liberal Catholics and Church leadership. A typical symposium was a 1963 two-part series on Jesuit education—not exactly rousing material.

But by 1964, Keating was broke, and his magazine was largely irrelevant. Enter Hinckle, a former reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle* whom Keating had brought on as promotions director but swiftly promoted to executive editor and associate publisher in 1964. One of the great characters of postwar American journalism, the eye-patched Hinckle was a newspaper man with a knack for the sensational and a gift for packaging it. Taking the helm at *Ramparts*, he cultivated a reputation for anarchic brilliance, frequently waiting past deadline to completely rip apart the issue, rewrite copy, and reconstruct the whole thing in the wee hours of the morning—all after several martinis.

Hinckle spiced up *Ramparts'* look, sold more advertising, and turned it from a quarterly into a monthly. The October 1964 issue likely stunned subscribers. Gone were the decorous colloquia about religious education and the morality of J.D. Salinger. The feature story was on that year's Harlem riots, with the headline,

“Harlem Diary: The Untold Story of the American Nightmare.” The cross on the back page was gone, replaced by a photo of a black man with a head wound, a white policeman looming above him. The next month, the cover sported a cartoon of Barry Goldwater as a rattlesnake. Readers began to catch on. “[S]top parading as a Catholic periodical,” said one letter to the editor. By March 1965, Keating would write in an editor’s note, “I suppose the magazine could best be described as ‘Catholic’ with a lower-case ‘c.’”

The other hire that catapulted the magazine into relevance was Robert Scheer. Working at City Lights bookstore after having just left grad school when Hinckle first met him, Scheer had gone to Vietnam as a freelance writer and produced a report, *How the United States Got Involved in Vietnam*, that was published as a pamphlet. Hinckle rewrote the piece, which uncovered the powerful corporate and ideological interests—the “Vietnam Lobby”—that dragged the United States into its involvement in Indochina, and published it in the July 1965 issue under a co-byline with Scheer. It was *Ramparts*’ biggest expose at the time. Shortly after, Scheer was named the magazine’s foreign editor.

Scheer’s arrival inaugurated the magazine’s period of greatest popularity and influence, but it was more than his radicalism that transformed *Ramparts*. With him on board, the monthly became a much more aggressive journalism outfit. From 1965 to 1968, *Ramparts* under “Hink/Scheer” became identified with the whistleblower expose and the blockbuster investigation—muckraking reborn.

The muckrakers of the Progressive Era focused on the crimes of the corporation; *Ramparts* fixated on the sins of the state, and the war was the biggest transgression of all. In 1966, Scheer urged Special Forces ex-sergeant Donald Duncan to tell the story of why he was leaving the military. In addition to the ad in the *Times*, *Ramparts* got the newspaper to write about the story. That was part of what made *Ramparts* stand out among left publications: its ability to attract the attention of the mainstream media, thereby amplifying its own voice. As former editor Peter Collier told *Folio* in 2004, “We measured our success by how well *The New York Times* covered us.” By that standard, it was a smash. The *Times* ran multiple profiles of *Ramparts* during its run; more importantly, it gave front-page coverage to several of its scoops. In addition to propelling its stories into the wider world, the *Times* coverage also put a stamp of establishment approval on its work.

Those publicity coups were magnified by the indignation of other outlets, notably *Time*. Henry Luce’s flagship was appalled by *Ramparts*, but its indignation came across as a geriatric shake of the fist at the young punks who just moved into the neighborhood. “*Ramparts* is slick enough to lure the unwary and bedazzled reader into accepting flimflam as fact,” went one assessment in

1967, its dismissiveness presaging the mainstream media's response to the rise of blogs decades later.

If the magazine could be said to have a nemesis, it was the CIA. Some of the magazine's biggest stories were at the expense of the agency, which came to assume metonymic power—the fallen liberal state emblemized—in the eyes of an increasingly wary left. In April 1966, *Ramparts* ran a sensational exposé revealing that Michigan State University from 1955 to 1962 had operated a multimillion-dollar program to assist the Diem regime—training Saigon police, writing the South Vietnamese constitution—under a contract with the CIA. Even more disturbing, the article disclosed that through 1959, the program even served as a cover for CIA agents operating in South Vietnam.

The story, with its star whistleblower (an MSU economist named Stanley K. Sheinbaum) and dogged detective work, was a breakthrough investigative piece that confirmed the left's worst fears—far from just conducting an invisible foreign policy, the agency was also infiltrating civilian institutions. The scoop created a media frenzy and alarmed agency officials. Richardson writes that the MSU story prompted CIA director William Raborn to order a “rundown...on a high-priority basis” of the magazine, and of Scheer and Sheinbaum in particular.

But that story would prove to be just a dry run for arguably the magazine's greatest exposé. On Valentine's Day 1967, *The New York Times* published a full-page ad for *Ramparts'* March issue. The copy read: “In its March issue, *Ramparts* magazine will document how the CIA has infiltrated and subverted the world of American student leaders, over the past fifteen years.” That same day, *The New York Times* published a front-page story revealing what *Ramparts* found: that the National Student Association (NSA), the largest college student organization in the country, had been covertly receiving funds from the CIA, via foundation fronts, from the early 1950s through 1966.

The revelation shook Washington. The next day, President Lyndon Johnson ordered the CIA to terminate all secret programs to aid student groups. Richardson notes that the story was also a benchmark for the CIA; in its aftermath, the agency broadened its domestic surveillance program. The scoop set off a journalistic stampede for the Internal Revenue Service, where reporters scoured foundation files to see what other ostensibly independent groups had received CIA money. The list of flagged organizations was staggering: the American

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Newspaper Guild, the United Auto Workers, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and more. In March, the magazine received the Polk Award for excellence in magazine reporting.

**W**hile Richardson gives due credit to *Ramparts* for reviving muckraking, he stops short of a full exploration of the magazine's affinities with its Progressive Era forebears. The parallels were striking and help explain the magazine's success. For one thing, *Ramparts* at its peak was actually more reformist than revolutionary, much like the muckrakers. The system, while broken and corrupt, was not irredeemable—at least not yet. Scheer may have been an ardent leftist, but Hinckle was more rebel than radical. Their unique alchemy produced a magazine that articulated a left-liberal outlook appealing to the far reaches of the coalition. As events proved resistant to reformism, both movement and magazine lurched further leftward.

Both *Ramparts* and the muckrakers were also more popularizers of progressive ideas than they were originators. Just as Lincoln Steffens had taken stories that were subterranean and moved them into the mainstream with *The Shame of the Cities*, *Ramparts* took parts of stories that had been published elsewhere and synthesized them in articles that left an imprint on the broader public. The MSU story originally had been covered by *Viet-Report*, an antiwar monthly, but no one paid attention. The NSA piece relied on a 1964 story about Texas Rep. Wright Patman, who accused the CIA of giving money to a private foundation that served as a “secret conduit” for the agency. It had been published in—of all places—*The New York Times*, but never gained traction until *Ramparts* picked up the trail three years later.

Presentation had something to do with the attention *Ramparts* got. Richardson rightly acknowledges art director Dugald Stermer's role in *Ramparts*' success. Having never worked in magazines, Stermer brought to *Ramparts* no preconceived concepts about magazine design. Under Stermer, the publication found its landmark look—hard-hitting, serious content (the type was all Times Roman, underscoring the sobriety) packaged with the whimsy and slickness of the major glossies.

But despite its cultural impact and boffo circulation numbers—in the aftermath of the NSA story, it rose to 229,000—the magazine was always in financial trouble. After Keating's money ran out, the magazine relied on a succession of progressive benefactors to swoop in and save it. Hinckle's legendary profligacy—expense-account lunches, first-class flights and hotel rooms, upscale dinners, and lavish parties—didn't help. And, with each step leftward, the *Ramparts* crowd grew gradually smaller. Readers and investors began to peel off. “[T]he

magazine's power...lay with the old liberals, and when they tired of its political line, and pulled out their money and expertise, the downhill slide began," wrote James Ridgeway in a 1969 profile in the *New York Times Magazine*. (One of those liberals was Martin Peretz, who withdrew funding after publication of an editorial that he deemed anti-Israel.) By the end of 1968 the left had unraveled—as did *Ramparts*. As Hinckle put it in his memoir, "After 1968, radical politics went to the bomb and *Ramparts* went bust."

Crippled with debt and abandoned by investors, the magazine was put up for bankruptcy in January 1969. It rose from the ashes later that year, but things were different. Hinckle, Scheer, and Stermer were gone, as was their hip, irreverent sensibility. In their place were David Horowitz and Collier, and an angrier, more severe tone—a reflection of the movement's mood. Under Horowitz and Collier, the magazine enacted the left's fantasy of collectivism, demolishing hierarchy and insisting on total equality. Pay was even across the board; staff meetings lasted hours as mail clerks had equal say as editors. The whole enterprise was unsustainable—and increasingly irrelevant. Splashy exposés gave way to glum thought pieces ("Marxese" as Horowitz called them). As Collier told Richardson, "Everything else was epilogue" when they took over. When the magazine finally ended its run in 1975, it was a shell of its old self.

**B**ut longevity shouldn't be the only criterion for success. Richardson ends his book with a reflection on *Ramparts'* influence, including a useful where-are-they-now glossary of the people involved with the magazine. The list itself is a story in miniature of the left's trajectory: unabashed leftists (Scheer, Tom Hayden), chastened liberals (Todd Gitlin), rueful neocons (Horowitz, Collier). In the wake of *Ramparts'* success came an efflorescence of muckraking and New Journalism—the Pentagon Papers, Woodward and Bernstein, not to mention *Rolling Stone* and *Mother Jones*, both founded by *Ramparts* alumni. Decades later, some of the names that graced its pages—Seymour Hersh, James Ridgeway, Noam Chomsky, Adam Hochschild, Alexander Cockburn, Pete Hamill, Brit Hume(!), among others—continue to define the discourse.

As the print media continues its death spiral, Richardson's book is a keen reminder of what we miss today. Certainly blogs and websites have stepped into the breach. Sites like Talking Points Memo and Huffington Post, to name two, carry on the *Ramparts* legacy after a fashion, with resourceful, progressive reportage in the former, and the melding of progressivism and pop in the latter (though one could argue that the success of Michael Moore might bear the closest resemblance to *Ramparts'* own winning formula of irreverence and outrage).

Underlying the rise of the progressive news sites is something that also helped fuel *Ramparts'* success: the pathetic performance of the establishment media. Richardson caps his book with an incisive quote from Hinckle, who, when asked why *Ramparts* was so successful under him, replies, "Probably because the rest of the press was so shitty." The same line could explain the success of the HuffPos and TPMs during the Bush years, when a progressive media critique took root. That disaffection with the establishment press looks unlikely to abate soon, ensuring a continued demand for a snarky, strident, progressive media.

A more important concern, however, is if—or even when—progressive disillusionment with the left-liberal consensus sets in. Just a year into the Obama era, the hard-earned progressive coalition of '08 already appears to be fraying. Huffington Post, in particular, has been unusually harsh in its criticisms of the Administration, echoing to some extent *Ramparts'* and the New Left's own disenchantment with the Democratic establishment. As a site like HuffPo and the rest of the lefty blogosphere recoil against consensus progressivism, will they end up dividing their audience, enacting a split that could hurt both progressive media and the liberal agenda?

That crack-up was, of course, what ultimately doomed both *Ramparts* and the New Left. It's yet one more parallel with the Progressive muckrakers. Both practiced a journalism that was inextricable from the prevailing social movement of its time. The muckrakers thrived because the concerns of the Progressives struck a chord with the public. So it was with *Ramparts* and the New Left. Eventually, both Progressivism and the New Left petered out. When they did, so did the strain of popular, crusading journalism that each movement nurtured. ▀