

THE SUBVERSIONS OF MR. KELLY

ON THE MEDIA

BY WILLIAM POWERS

It's been a week since the death of Michael Kelly, my erstwhile editor and friend, and appreciations of the man and his smashing life have been streaming from all corners of the media. I've read every one that's come across the screen and agreed with every word of praise. Mike was as talented, smart, funny, inspiring, kind, and brave as everyone says he was, and then some.

I can also confirm the one claim that has raised eyebrows, Maureen Dowd's left-field assertion that Mike was a "dazzling" dancer. At my wedding party six years ago, he was still on the dance floor at 1 a.m., long after the band had left, and the bad '70s mix tapes had come out and everyone else had collapsed. My mother-in-law, who had a career on the stage, watched him in awe and breathlessly vowed afterward that nobody—nobody—had moves like his. And nobody did.

Even as we recall the many marvels of Mike, I know that wherever he is, he's chuckling. He was a great observer of careers—other people's and his own—and he had all kinds of theories about what becomes a legend most. He also liked to dissect obits and appreciations, to note how journalists take the long, messy, meandering life stories of accomplished people and reduce them to smooth, facile packages. The Mike Kelly Story is already on its way to becoming just such a package, and I want to note on Mike's behalf—and before he denounces us in a poison-pen column from the beyond—that in his case this is a huge mistake.

The most amazing thing about Mike's career is how unsmooth and unpackaged it was, and how blithely he defied the established rules about how to get ahead in the media. Rule No. 1 is, once you've clawed your way inside the establishment and secured a personal beachhead at a respectable daily paper, a prestige magazine, or a major TV organization, you do whatever it takes to hang on.

That is, you do all the things that people



NO MEDIA BUREAUCRAT: In some of America's best newsrooms, Kelly was the insider's outsider.

everywhere do to survive and prosper in bureaucracies.

Read the landscape carefully. Say the right things. Protect your flank. Please your superiors, both bosses present and potential bosses future. And cultivate your talent so it delights the crucial constituencies. There are invisible tribes in the media—cultural and ideological, high and low, left, right, and center—and they lavish jobs and prizes on those who meet their stinting criteria. The surest way to the top is to do a new, improved version of the story, the interview, the column, the book that's been done a thousand times before, because that's what most people, the poor dolts, crave. Step up to the template and meet it.

Mike was nobody's fool, and he knew precisely how the system worked. Yet he strutted around the media establishment for 25 years subverting it at every opportunity. He got terrific jobs at places like *The Baltimore Sun*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker*, and then did things that nobody who'd had those jobs before had ever done. While working in the Washington bureau of the rather staid *Sun*, he wrote stories in a style that was the opposite of staid and took controversial celebrity dates—Fawn Hall, Donna Rice—to big media dinners. Washington gasped, then copied him.

While writing for *The Times*' magazine in the early '90s, he concluded that the new Democratic president and his wife, still in the glow of their triumph, were

morally bankrupt, and he excoriated each of them in blistering profiles. To see those audacious pieces in *The Times—The Times!*—back then was to be gobstruck. *Who is this Michael Kelly?* It was the question people asked over and over as he moved from place to place. He never stayed long, and sometimes departed under less-than-pleasant circumstances, having alienated those who signed his checks. He loved his friends, but he treasured his enemies.

He drove people crazy. In his *Washington Post* columns, he settled into a style one might call the scorched-earth polemic, in which he made it clear that anyone who disagreed with him on the subject at hand was not just wrong, not just misguided, but deeply, irredeemably corrupt. Yet he had a mild, tolerant personality, and his own political views were more complicated and interesting than he ever let on in those columns. I know, from countless liquid conversations in the Madison Hotel bar, that his political pantheon included such names as Roosevelt and Moynihan and that some of his views had a decidedly old-liberal cast. But he mostly kept those ideas to himself, didn't take on those issues or use them to modulate his fierce public persona. Why? Because he didn't want to be just another media smoothie, one of those who clip and trim their arguments in order to remain in the club.

Mike was in some of the media's best clubs, but he wasn't of them. He relished his peculiar status as the insider's outsider, the savage poet of the op-ed page, unembarrassed speaker of what he considered the deep, unvarnished truth. In a time of so much media conformity and widespread blandness, it's encouraging that our trade didn't just tolerate Mike Kelly, but rewarded and even cherished him. And that in his death, a hero's death, we are all seeing again the virtue and the possibilities of our calling. ■

The author can be reached at bpowers@nationaljournal.com.