



## *From The Independent (UK)*

Fred J. Cook

### Maverick investigative reporter

*09 May 2003 Fred James Cook, journalist and writer: born Point Pleasant, New Jersey 8 March 1911; twice married (one son, one daughter); died Interlaken, New Jersey 4 April 2003.*

Fred J. Cook was a reporter who specialised in exposing corruption within the institutions of American society. In a career as a freelance reporter, and through some 45 books, Cook wrote exposés of the FBI, organised crime, the oil industry, the military-industrial complex, and the Warren Commission's cover-up of the Kennedy assassination. Although Studs Terkel once called him "the finest investigative reporter in the land", his lasting legacy may be as the plaintiff before the Supreme Court in the "Red Lion" case, which established the fairness doctrine for US broadcasters.

Cook's crusading career started early. Born in New Jersey, he attended the state university Rutgers and in 1932 became editor of the New Jersey Courier. Committed to the New Deal, his reporting ran foul of the Republican machine. His later book *American Political Bosses and Machines* (1973) drew on those experiences.

His journalistic career nearly foundered on the Hindenburg disaster, his biggest local story. Because his mother wanted to watch the airship's arrival, Cook wrote a generic story for the paper, which he put to bed early. On the scene as the Hindenburg burst into flames, he managed to stop the presses just in time to dictate a new front page.

He became a reporter on the New York World Telegram & Sun, where his balanced coverage of a "loyalty" hearing attracted the attention of Carey McWilliams, Editor of *The Nation*, a political weekly. McWilliams hired him to look into the Alger Hiss case; Richard Nixon's career had been made by "exposing" Hiss as a Soviet spy. His articles for *The Nation* were collected as *The Unfinished Story of Alger Hiss* (1958), one of the first books to question the official line. His suspicion of the FBI's role in the case led to more articles, and his best-known book, *The FBI Nobody Knows* (1964).

Cook wrote true-crime books for Gold Medal Books, an early paperback house. His studies *The Secret Rulers* (1966) and *Mafia!* (1973) were among the first investigations of organised crime in America. When his first wife, Julia, died of a cerebral haemorrhage caused by a drug she was given after heart



surgery, Cook wrote the moving *Julia's Story: the tragedy of an unnecessary death* (1974). His own memoir, *Maverick: fifty years of investigative reporting*, appeared in 1984.

The "Red Lion" decision began with Cook's 1964 book about the Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater: *extremist of the right*. The demagogic Billy James Hargis attacked Cook in a radio broadcast, from WGCB in Red Lion, Pennsylvania, accusing him of smearing Goldwater and alleging falsely that Cook had once been fired for journalistic misconduct. When the station refused him the right of reply, Cook sued the Federal Communication Commission, arguing its fairness doctrine guaranteed him access to such redress. In 1969 the Supreme Court ruled the public's right to know the truth superseded the broadcaster's right to free speech.

The FCC suspended the part of the fairness doctrine requiring journalistic balance in 1987. In 2000 a federal appeals court threw out the individual's right of response to personal attacks. Despite mounting criticism of political bias in American news broadcasts, the FCC Chairman Michael Powell (son of Secretary of State Colin Powell) is expected to reduce government regulation even further. It would be just the sort of story Fred J. Cook loved to cover.

Michael Carlson

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