

The Friendship, and Toughness, of Hugh Sidey

By Gerald R. Ford
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It wasn't supposed to be this way. Like most men my age, I have given a thought or two to my funeral. As a former president, I'm almost required to, since the military periodically updates its plans, and each presidential family is solicited for personal touches. Among these is a choice of eulogists. Thus it was, a few months ago, that I called Hugh Sidey.

We'd known each other forever, Hugh coming to Washington just a few years after the voters of Michigan's 5th Congressional District sent me there. Maybe it was our shared Midwestern background, his transparent decency or the tough but fair coverage he accorded me and nine other American presidents; in any event, I had always regarded Hugh as a friend. So I asked him if he would do me the honor of speaking at Washington's National Cathedral when the time came.

I did so in part for symbolic reasons. I like reporters, even if I haven't always liked what some wrote about me. I figure that's a pretty minor price to pay for a free press in a free society. But I also hoped to remind people in our often overheated era that it is possible for a politician and a journalist to enjoy mutual respect, admiration and, yes, friendship, all the while understanding the necessarily adversarial relationship that often exists between those in power and those who report on their activities.

Hugh Sidey died this week at the age of 78. Anyone who read him knew America's presidents. Anyone who knew him knew America. In a very real sense, he never left Greenfield, Iowa, where four generations of Sideys practiced journalism with integrity and the perspective that laughter uniquely supplies. "A sense of humor . . . is needed armor," he once wrote of the presidency. "Joy in one's heart and some laughter on one's lips is a sign that the person down deep has a pretty good grasp on life."

Hugh had a sure grasp of life. An insider who never forgot those on the outside, he was warm and wise about Washington and its rituals. He appreciated Woodrow Wilson's observation that men who arrive in our nation's capital -- presidents included -- have a tendency to either grow or swell. But he was incapable of cynicism. Hugh scored more than his share of scoops, but along with the ability to pierce official secrecy went an empathy that enabled him to see the White House and its occupants first and always as very human beings.

Whether reporting on the U-2 crisis, the Missiles of October or the 22nd of November; Vietnam or Watergate; Richard Nixon's opening to China, or Jimmy Carter's high-risk diplomacy at Camp David; Ronald Reagan's years of renewal; the tumult of the '90s followed by the shattering events of Sept. 11 -- Hugh put readers at the center of events. At the same time, he made it possible for millions who might never visit the White House to experience it, in good and not so good times, through a president's eyes and ears.

Over the years he became something of a Washington institution himself, seemingly as much a part of the presidency as Air Force One or Camp David. Yet he never behaved like an institution, and I suspect he never

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stopped pinching himself over his extraordinary good fortune.

For his friends, and they are legion, the good fortune was to know and learn from and simply enjoy Hugh's company. Now he is forever part of the old house whose history he brought to life. Hugh not only explained Washington to the rest of America; by being the kind of person he was, no less than by setting the highest of journalistic standards, Hugh Sidey also embodied the best of America in Washington.

The writer was 38th president of the United States.

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