NPR.org, June 8, 2009 · H.G. Wells was wrong. A good biographer doesn't have to be a "conscientious enemy" of his subject. Take American Radical, D.D. Guttenplan's valentine to the iconic investigative reporter I.F. Stone. A compelling account of an anti-establishment journalist who became a Washington insider, the book also provides a lively examination of the American Left, from the Roaring '20s to the misadventure in Vietnam.

Stone is all but unknown these days to anyone under 60. A reporter and columnist at the New York Post and The Nation in the 1930s and '40s, he covered sit-down strikes, the rise of the Nazis and the civil rights movement. He came into his own in the 1950s, Guttenplan demonstrates, as founder and "sole practitioner" of I.F. Stone's Weekly. Published on a shoestring, the paper reflected Stone's view that "government is run by liars, and nothing they say should be believed."

A near-deaf man who knew how to listen, Stone tried to get his "stuff from the horse's mouth, or the other end at any rate." And he perfected the art of looking "for the nuggets of awkward fact" — like data on nuclear fallout — that democratic governments hid in plain sight.

Stone was often prescient. In 1959, he anticipated Richard Nixon's "opening to China" by more than a decade. Since Democrats, as Stone wrote, didn't want to be seen as "soft on communism," the then-vice president held "the key to peace." Stone declared the war in Vietnam all but lost as early as 1963, and a year later speculated that the attack on the U.S.S. Maddox that precipitated the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution might well have been provoked by the United States.

Guttenplan recognizes that Stone's claim to the title "first blogger" has become "a cyber-space cliche." But, he adds perceptively, banishment from the corridors of power after the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s saved Stone — and his subscribers — from mere punditry. I.F. Stone's Weekly became legendary for grounding opinion in hard and trustworthy information.

Well-researched and gracefully written, An American Radical gets inside the head and heart of a courageous and cantankerous reporter with a "street-wise, lapel grabbing" signature style. With newspapers on life support these days, Guttenplan's paean to investigative journalism and one of its boldest practitioners is sure to make some of his readers nostalgic for a return to the Stone Age.
To the *Meet the Press* audience on December 12, 1949, there was nothing special about the confrontation between I. F. Stone and Dr. Morris Fishbein. As editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Fishbein was a well-known foe of what the AMA called "socialized medicine" in any form; Stone, a sometime member of the *Meet the Press* panel since 1946, could always be relied on for provocative, irreverent, and persistent questioning. The country's most influential physician had already denounced national health insurance as "the kind of regimentation that led to totalitarianism in Germany." When Fishbein also condemned compulsory coverage as "socialistic," Stone demonstrated why the show's producers considered him "a good needler": "Dr. Fishbein, let's get nice and rough. In view of his advocacy of compulsory health insurance, do you regard Mr. Harry Truman as a card-bearing Communist, or just a deluded fellow traveler?"

The arguments over national health care did not advance much in the next sixty years, but for I. F. Stone that broadcast marked a kind of limit. After a career that saw him rise to national prominence not only on television and radio but as a correspondent for the *Nation* and a columnist for *PM*—the legendary New York tabloid that refused advertisements and revolutionized American newspapers—he was about to disappear. Not literally, of course. For the moment, Stone still had a job, though his latest employer, New York's *Daily Compass*, had fewer readers than the same city's Yiddish *Daily Forward*. And if the days when his habit of sauntering into various New Deal agencies and making free with the phone—and the files—were behind him, he still had friends in Washington, some of whom were even willing to be seen talking with him. But it was to be another eighteen years before I. F. Stone was next on national television. And though he lived to an age when political punditry dominated Sunday morning broadcasting, he was never again invited back on *Meet the Press*.

A decade earlier, Stone had already developed as much "access" as any journalist in the country; his patrons included Felix Frankfurter, the Harvard Law professor and future Supreme Court justice, and Thomas "Tommy the Cork" Corcoran, the president's political fixer. During World War II, Stone worked closely with Walter Reuther and other union leaders in proposing plans to increase production of aircraft and arms; his exposés of the Alcoa Aluminum trust's war profiteering and the Standard Oil Company's cozy cartel agreements with the German firm I. G. Farben brought him kudos from the chair of the special Senate Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, Harry S. Truman. After the war, Stone's undercover journey accompanying Jewish survivors of the Nazi Holocaust as they defied the British blockade of Palestine made frontpage headlines; his reports under fire from the new state of Israel made him a hero to America's Jews.

And then, slowly, he vanishes. He opposes President Truman's loyalty program and the establishment of NATO, supports the Marshall Plan, and is denounced by the Communist *Daily Worker* for reporting favorably from Yugoslavia, whose leader, the former partisan fighter Josip Tito, declares his country's independence from the policies imposed in the Balkans by the Soviet Union. In February 1950, speaking at a rally against the hydrogen bomb, Stone begins, "FBI agents and fellow subversives . . ." The bureau will soon put him under daily surveillance. Although he is the author of four books, each one more successful than the last, when he...
writes another, on the Korean War, no publisher in America will touch it. Returning to New York in 1951 after a year in Paris as foreign correspondent for the Compass, he can't get his passport renewed. By the time that paper closes its doors in 1952, he is effectively blacklisted as a reporter; not even the Nation will give him a job. He is forty-four years old and relies on a hearing aid to make out any sound below a shout. He writes, "I feel for the moment like a ghost."

For some time he lives in a kind of internal exile. The American reporter more closely identified with the Jewish state than any other sits in Washington, D.C., in a rented office waiting for the phone to ring. When, after three years, he realizes that he hasn't had a single visitor apart from building maintenance workers and the mailman (who has been secretly sharing Stone's mail with the FBI), he gives up the office and works from home. Starting with a tiny fragment of his old magazine and newspaper audience — too few at first even to cover expenses, let alone pay his salary — he decides to launch his own newspaper. I. F. Stone's Weekly gives him a platform from which he can rally his fellow heretics, attack their persecutors, and, most of all, encourage resistance. "Early Soviet novels used a vivid phrase, 'former people,' about the remnants of the dispossessed ruling class," he writes. "On the inhospitable sidewalks of Washington these days, the editor often feels like one of the 'former people.' " Not all of his subscribers appreciate the irony, but for readers who want a radical perspective on current events free from sectarian distortion and distraction, the Weekly has no competition. Throughout the long nightmare of the American inquisition, whenever citizens stand up to claim their rights, I. F. Stone is there. Somehow he survives.

And slowly, almost imperceptibly, his audience returns. In 1956, thanks in part to a landmark legal victory by his brother-in-law, Leonard Boudin, he is again granted a passport. Able at last to go back to Israel for the first time in years, he returns via Moscow, eager to see whether Khrushchev's secret speech to the Twentieth Party Congress is really a harbinger of genuine reform. Comparing himself to "a swimmer under water who must rise to the surface or his lungs will burst," he declares: "Whatever the consequences, I have to say what I really feel after seeing the Soviet Union . . . This is not a good society and it is not led by honest men." Yet Stone is a long way from respectability. On Cuba and on domestic civil rights his positions are far to the left even of most liberals, and his opposition to nuclear testing and to the American interventions in Guatemala and Southeast Asia place him well outside the cold war consensus. Though his initial enthusiasm for Fidel Castro is tempered after three trips to Cuba (and a spell in a Havana jail), his continuing support for students who want to travel there and make up their own minds (in defiance of U.S. law) and for blacks rising up in the American South brings him to the notice of a new generation of readers "bred in at least modest comfort" and looking uncomfortably at the world they are to inherit.

It is this generation and its response to the Vietnam War that plucks I. F. Stone from the dustbin of history and places him, once again, on the front ranks of American activism. Before the incident in August 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin that gives rise to the large-scale involvement of U.S. forces in Vietnam, the Weekly — after ten years of struggle — has barely 20,000 subscribers; after two years of war in Vietnam, the figure has risen above 30,000; in 1969, a single appearance by Stone on The Dick Cavett Show brings 5,000 new subscribers, pushing the total above 70,000. In April 1965, when Stone is the only journalist asked to speak at the first March on Washington to End the War, Lyndon Johnson has no need to wonder how many divisions I. F. Stone has. The president can look out the window to see 25,000 protesters on the White House lawn.

Popular Front columnist and New Deal propagandist. Fearless opponent of McCarthy and radical pamphleteer. Scourge of official liars and elder statesman to the New Left. The fourth act in Stone's career sees him retire from the Weekly in 1971 to become a contributing editor to the New York Review of Books — and
an avid amateur classicist out to solve one of the great mysteries of Western civilization: how it came about that the ancient Athenians, inventors of democracy and originators of the humanist ideal of free speech, put a man to death merely for speaking his mind. Published as the author turns eighty, *The Trial of Socrates* is an international best seller, making Stone, politically still an unrepentant radical, into a kind of national treasure whose death is marked by all four of the network evening news broadcasts.