

## RETROSPECTIVE

# Daniel S. Greenberg (1931–2020)

## Incisive science journalist and commentator

By Colin Norman

**D**aniel S. Greenberg, pioneering journalist, author, and a founding editor of *Science's* news section, died on 9 March at his home in Washington, D.C. He was 88. Dan was among the first reporters to write about the productive but sometimes troubled relationship between basic research and the U.S. government, and for more than five decades he was an influential, often acerbic, observer of research policy and the research community itself.

Dan's career as a science journalist began in 1961 when he was hired by *Science* with the vague remit to write about issues involving science and scientists. He was not an obvious choice: He had no formal scientific training—he graduated from Columbia University in 1953 with a degree in English—and later admitted that he had not even heard of *Science* at the time. But he did have 6 years of reporting experience at an evening newspaper in Wilmington, Delaware, and *The Washington Post*, as well as an intimate knowledge of Washington politics, having spent a year working as a congressional fellow. Soon after Dan joined *Science*, the editor who had hired him left; he was on his own.

With the support of Philip Abelson, who was appointed *Science's* editor-in-chief in 1962, Dan built up the news section, then called News and Comment, into an authoritative and insightful source of information and analysis of government policies for basic research and the U.S. research enterprise. Dan led a small, talented team of reporters in covering a wide range of issues, including the space program; the growth of the National Institutes of Health; the channeling of scientific advice into the government; and the expensive project-turned-fiasco called Mohole, which aimed at drilling through Earth's crust.

At the time, the idea of a journalist-written section in a publication devoted to publishing research papers was highly unusual, and so was the approach that Dan and his team took. They covered basic research policy in much the same way a business reporter would cover development of economic pol-

icy: as a set of competing interests. Federal funding of basic research had ballooned in the postwar years, and scientists had become advisers to the expanding science bureaucracy. The fierce competition for government dollars led some scientists to become lobbyists for particular projects and disciplines, in stark contrast to the image of the scientist as a dispassionate seeker of the truth.

Dan laid out this viewpoint in his 1967 book, *The Politics of Pure Science*, which drew heavily on his reporting for *Science*. It became a widely acclaimed and discussed work. (I first came across it in 1968 as a student at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom, where it was recommended reading for a course on science policy.) However,



it was not greeted with universal enthusiasm. In a preface to the second edition, Dan noted that it sparked “reactions that flowed from the belief that the scientific community should be exempt from the types of journalistic inquiries that are commonplace to other segments of our society.” He called that attitude “nonsense.”

Dan left *Science* in 1970 and launched the biweekly newsletter *Science and Government Report (SGR)*, through which he continued to chronicle developments in the basic research enterprise, many of which he found troubling, such as paid lobbying of Congress for projects that had not been peer reviewed and growing corporate influence on academic research. Dan wrote *SGR* himself, with the help of multiple sources

within the government and academia. His wife, Wanda Reif, a lawyer and former congressional aide, provided management and business support.

Although its circulation never exceeded 2000 readers, *SGR* flourished in the pre-internet days when expensive newsletters were a critical source of insider information. It was a must read for anybody interested in science policy. Dan sold *SGR* in 1997 and distilled much of his reporting into two books, *Science, Money, and Politics* (published in 2001) and *Science for Sale* (published in 2007). *The Politics of Pure Science*, long out of print, was republished in 1999.

Dan's writing style was unmistakable: direct, often critical, and sometimes bemused. It could also be funny: He satirized the endless thirst for research grants through the exploits of a character he called Dr. Grant Swinger, Director of the Center for the Absorption of Federal Funds. And he loved to skewer pompous scientists and officials by printing extracts from speeches under the headline “High Vacuum Oratory.”

His legacy goes beyond a vast collection of published writing. Dan influenced other publications' coverage of basic research and was a role model and mentor to many young science writers, myself included. I first met him in the early 1970s when I was a correspondent for *Nature* based in Washington, D.C. Like *Science*, *Nature* had launched a news section written by journalists. Dan's advice to a rather green young reporter finding his way through the complexities of the U.S. research system proved invaluable, as did Dan and Wanda's friendship over subsequent decades.

We would meet over dinner in Washington, D.C., and Dan would offer amused, sometimes outraged, and always insightful comments about people and the background to decisions in science policy. Our discussions over the years usually involved events we had already covered—we were writing for similar audiences, and Dan, a competitive journalist, was not about to give away his upcoming stories; nor was I.

Warm and unpretentious, Dan had an infectious sense of humor. He was a proud father and grandfather, with four daughters from his previous marriage, a stepdaughter, and 18 grandchildren. He was also devoted to his Labrador dogs, Walter and Ben, named after the journalist Walter Lippmann and Benjamin Franklin.

Dan died before the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States. Wanda says she misses the discussions they would have had about the pandemic and the government's response. Dan would have had plenty of interesting things to say. ■

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