

# Frank McCulloch: Asking the Questions

*Frank McCulloch was a legend in Vietnam. . . He covered Vietnam with great energy and style and courage, and he left the country a deeply disillusioned and disappointed man. . . He came to see what the generals could not see, that it could not be done, that the price was too high.*

— David Halberstam  
*The Powers That Be*, 1979

**W**hen Frank McCulloch left the Saigon bureau of *Time* magazine in 1966, he may not have known that his already stellar journalistic career was less than

half over, that he would go on to become a top editor at two more California dailies, *The Sacramento Bee* (1975-85) and the *San Francisco Examiner* (1985-92) — having already been managing editor of the *Los Angeles Times* in the early 1960s. But in 1966, the tragedy of the Vietnam War — and his belief that he had failed in his efforts to unmask the tragedy in a magazine whose publisher, Henry Luce, was an insistent hawk — had shaken this toughest of journalists to his core.

He returned to the United States, continued to work for *Time-Life* as an editor and bureau chief in Washington, D.C., and New York, then acted on a lifelong interest in education coverage when he founded *Learning* magazine in 1972. Three years later, at 55 and with a journalistic career of awesome proportions already behind him, he took on the McClatchy newspaper dynasty, changing *The Bee*, that stodgy but influential Gray Lady of the West, into a dynamic, award-winning showcase for his first journalistic love, investigative reporting. “Actually,” he told his young reporters, “I’ve never liked the term, ‘investigative reporter.’ All reporters should be good investigators.” It was vintage McCulloch — unpretentious, hard-nosed, direct and wise.

His staff at *The Bee*, many numbed by years of traditional, often uninspired reporting — saturation coverage of the annual Camellia Festival and the State Fair were popular venues for *Bee* reporters when I joined the paper in 1969 — adored him. Thirty years later, it is a measure of the iron loyalty he inspired in his reporting staff, wherever he went, that many of us came to Sacramento from all over the state March 4 to honor McCulloch as he received the first Lifetime Achievement Award at the fifth annual California Journalism Awards sponsored by the Center for California Studies at

California State University-Sacramento.

McCulloch received not one, but two, standing ovations as he made his way through the crowd in the dimly lit restaurant that night. Walking a little more stiffly at 79, robbed of much of his sight by a series of small strokes, but standing tall and straight like the Marine drill sergeant he once was, he spoke to the crowd of 230-plus, without notes, typically self-deprecating, still funny and razor-sharp.

It was entirely fitting that two of the award recipients — *Bee* Political Editor John Jacobs and Lance Williams of the *Examiner* — are McCulloch proteges. The list of reporters and editors who consider McCulloch their mentor — or as Jacobs so aptly put it, their “spiritual father” — is long and distinguished. Doug Hope, senior editor at the *San Diego Union-Tribune* and a former assistant managing editor at *The Bee*, perhaps said it best: “There are many times over the years that I would stop and think, ‘How would Frank handle this?’”

McCulloch shepherded to publication many a project that other editors might have abandoned or, more likely, never undertaken. His

example shines in this age of tabloid sensationalism, with its instant, continuous, mind-numbing web sites and cable programs masquerading as “news,” where serious journalism must compete with the likes of the *Drudge Report*, and screaming pundits drive coverage of — what? The creative use of cigars?

The night before the McCulloch award, the world was treated to a two-hour interview with “that woman,” and we journalists watched it and talked about it and wondered, is this what it’s come to? And if it’s so awful, why are we watching? Tough questions, McCulloch says, often with no clear answers.

“If we continue to inspect every one of those warts and blemishes that people in public office have, can they ever govern?” he asks. “Will democracy work? Where do we draw the line? When I get angry and discouraged and upset with the press, as I do, I remember that there ain’t no second best. It’s all we’ve got. But there are a whole bunch of serious questions we have to ask ourselves.” 🏠

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