

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE G-1WASHINGTON POST  
9 February 1985

# George Crile's Time Of Trial

## The Accused CBS Producer And His Unyielding Ways

By Eleanor Randolph  
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK—It was clearly the social event of the season—a subdued mingling of blue bloods in the turbulent autumn of 1968.

While the headlines rang in news of battles on the streets and war in Vietnam, the society pages fairly chimed with items about 18-year-old Anne Pat-ten, a descendant of John Jay, daughter of Susan Mary Alsop and stepdaughter of Joseph Alsop. She had married a young man from a prominent Cleveland family, George Crile III.

And although it was still a time when such weddings were news, down to the pink peau de soie A-line bridesmaids' dresses, it is the congregation at this event that strikes one as ironic or even odd in retrospect.

Among those The New York Times described as "figures prominent in society and politics" were Robert S. McNamara, by then president of the World Bank; Paul H. Nitze, deputy defense secretary; and Walt W. Rostow, Lyndon Johnson's national security adviser.

These men, who came in September 1968 to toast the bride, would rally 16 years later to testify against the groom. They have taken the stand for retired general William C. Westmoreland in his \$120 million libel action against CBS Inc. They have also stood firmly against codefendant George Crile.

Now 39, divorced from Anne and remarried to film producer Susan Lyne, Crile sits in Room 318 of Manhattan's federal court watching the line of old connections—people he talked with easily, who played killer tennis with him in Maine and Washington. These still famous men have joined a long list of other leaders of the Vietnam era to shake their heads in collective dismay over "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," the CBS documentary that accused Westmoreland of being part of a conspiracy to withhold crucial intelligence on the enemy in Vietnam from his superiors, including LBJ.

And as the trial draws to its close in the next few weeks, it is clear that no matter who wins, the biggest personal loss may well be George Crile's. His connections gone, his journalism scrutinized, his soaring ambitions aborted in midlife flight, Crile's name now means trouble in the news business.

"I've tended to choose stories where there are difficult choices, when no matter what you do people are going to be upset," Crile said yesterday after testifying.

"When you go into highly charged areas and move that far into those areas, you are unquestionably going to have strong reactions . . . I tend to like the impulse that leads me into those stories, the difficult stories."

Since he graduated from Trinity College in Connecticut, Crile's path has been littered with people who praise him as a brave and brilliant journalist—and others who think he is an arrogant and wrongheaded zealot. His work has produced awards and lawsuits, establishment praise and institutional criticism. And if there is a persistent question about this meticulously groomed man whose full head of hair seems to be manicured rather than barbered, it is this: Why has this golden boy drawn so much tarnish?

Says a friend, who asked not to be quoted by name, "He is a very odd combination of being quite patrician but also has a chip on his shoulder. Somewhere in his background in Cleveland are the keys to George's personality."

From the lofty view of his West Side penthouse, Crile recently talked about his youth in an extraordinary family, which John S. Wilbur Jr., a childhood friend, describes as full of money, power and "immense amounts of energy."

His grandfather, George Washington Crile, was a pioneer in surgery who started what is now the Cleveland Clinic—a medical center that has

Continued

drawn patients from around the world. His father, Dr. George (Barney) Crile Jr., was censured by the Cleveland Medical Association for having told women there might be other choices than the disfiguring radical mastectomy.

"I always consider him the savior of the American breast," Crile says now.

Sipping tea in his apartment, he says, "My grandfather was the pioneer in medical techniques and to a certain extent my father has made his reputation challenging the surgical establishment."

There were hard times, too, especially when George's mother, Jane Halle Crile, died of a progression of cancers that began in the breast.

"He didn't treat her at the time,"

Crile says of his father, "But she was treated basically in the same fashion [his father favored]."

He recalls that several years later, when he was doing a story for his first paper the Gary Post-Tribune, he was introduced through the fog of a steam room to several local doctors.

"They picked up my name and they just started having this wild argument about my father," he remembers. "One said, 'There's something to what he's saying.' The other said, 'It's irresponsible—women are dying because of it,' and another said, 'Well, you know what happened to his wife.'"

Adds Crile, "It was a very surreal experience." Telling the story, relating the details almost monochromatically, Crile lives up to his reputation as a man who carefully metes out any display of emotion.

The Criles' apartment is dominated by books, overstuffed furniture and large antique animal heads, their tuxedo showing signs of age. His wife, a handsome blond woman who is pregnant with their first child, his third, helps find books authored by the Crile family on everything from scuba diving to a comparison of how governments and human beings prepare for war.

Friends say a meal at Crile's boyhood home in Cleveland was something like a raucous day in Hyde Park. The large family always ate together, and Barney Crile would often bring home visitors who quickly learned the price of dinner.

"My father liked to debate," says Crile. "If he brought home a lawyer, my father would start the conversa-

tion, 'Lawyers are the major problem in this country.'

"There was always provocative conversation," he adds. "I learned to duck, but I also learned to debate."

The Criles specialized in vacations that George still calls "genuine adventures." "As a family, we were a little like a documentary unit," Crile says, smiling over one family book that shows the entire clan dressed in diving gear, including faces painted on their bottoms "to scare off sharks and barracuda."

"It's a tribe, the Crile family. When

you marry a Crile, you marry a tribe," says Anne Crile, who is planning to marry a businessman soon and move to Salt Lake City. "It is a very competitive, exciting group of people where there is no snobbism. You are judged on your accomplishments."

Faced with such judgments, George decided early to forsake the family profession of medicine and to become a journalist. After meeting publishing executive Walter Ridder at the Washington home of Crile's aunt, Kay Halle, Crile asked for a job on the Gary Post-Tribune.

The results of that union, both Crile and Ridder say now, were disastrous.

Crile's voice is soft, lisping over the sibilants as he talks with little visible emotion about his past.

At the Gary newspaper, Ridder, the publisher, virtually anointed the young Crile, who often skirted the working editors to take his copy directly to Ridder. As Crile acknowledges now, with a small laugh, "They were furious at me. They didn't like people like me coming in and telling them they were troglodytes."

He recalls, "I came in and discovered evil in Gary, Indiana, and was horrified by it." Mainly, he wrote a massive piece on the tax assessor in Gary, accusing him of taking bribes and bullying anybody who challenged him. A friend called him St. George, out to slay the dragons of Gary. "I turned this in to Walter Ridder, and no one would look at it—they wouldn't even talk about it," Crile says.

Promoted to the Pentagon beat in Washington, Crile continued pushing the Gary tax assessor story until one of Ralph Nader's lawyers leaked it elsewhere. "With that, Walter Ridder, in effect, fired me," Crile says.

"There were always problems with George," says Ridder, who is now retired and living in McLean, Va. "He acted as if he were beyond the pale because of his relationship with me."

Ridder says he would often do the research and checking for Crile's stories before they were published.

"I wouldn't publish a thing he produced without triple-checking it," Ridder says. "He drove me crazy because he would come up with stories that were so fantastic, and he was so stubborn. If you didn't believe him or agree with him, he got angry," Ridder recalls.

Ridder's wife Marie, also a journalist, says Crile's failure in Gary was "in some ways sad . . . If George had been more accurate or careful with his figures, he would have done so much better. He was not too far off the track," she says.

Indeed, the tax assessor later went to jail after Gary reporter Bob McClure followed Crile's leads and found new sources willing to talk to the Post-Tribune. If the Ridders sound embittered, it is understandable. After they parted ways with young Crile, he wrote the story of the tax assessor for Harper's Magazine. He included a vigorous indictment of the Gary paper, accusing them of refusing to run the article because it did not serve their own best interests. Crile said the Ridders were enjoying their own tax breaks from the man he wanted to expose.

"He knew perfectly well that was not so," steams Marie Ridder.

The tax assessor sued Harper's for \$5 million, and after five years and around a half million dollars in legal fees for the stuggling Harper's operation, a court of appeals dismissed the case, ruling that, as then Harper's editor Robert Shnayerson put it, "although we might have been wrong here and there, we were not malicious."

"It cost a lot of blood and money," Shnayerson said of the case. "However, I felt good about defending George to the hilt because he had picked his enemies so well . . ."

Crile now says of the Gary article that it was one that "pitted reformers against the old-time system, blacks against whites, outsiders against insiders. It was a very intense moment

Continued

and the article was uncompromising. The wise thing, of course, would have been to just let it go."

To be uncompromising, however, is a high and difficult calling for the real world. And when Crile went to CBS, this inability to ease off a story, to "give it a little breathing room," as some journalists say, stirred the controversies he enjoyed covering.

==

Two divergent views on George Crile:

■ Susan Mary Alsop, describing herself as still "devoted to George," says of her ex-son-in-law: "He's accident-prone, for one thing, but he's also the most unobtrusive man imaginable. Not that I mean he's not intelligent. He is, but he is incredibly trusting and naive. That has been his undoing, if undoing it is."

■ Says Shnayerson: "He should have been a missionary. He has a martyr inclination; he is determined that he is so abstractly right and everyone else is wrong. It's a very religious kind of zealotry . . . a puritan mentality—which I mean in the original sense, the quest to purify, to be pure."

==

Insiders at CBS say Crile's methods have been maddening. He has been accused of wearing blinders when he worked on a story, failing to notice evidence at odds with his own views and being tough on his colleagues.

His record at the network before "The Uncounted Enemy" is one of somebody reaching for the top and sometimes missing. One documentary, "The Battle for South Africa" (1978), won a George Foster Peabody Award and an Emmy. "The CIA's Secret Army," which Crile helped produce and which aired in June 1977, won an American Film Festival Blue Ribbon. "That is perhaps the reporting I am proudest of," he says now.

But there was also an April 1980 show called "Gay Power, Gay Politics," which accused the homosexual community in San Francisco of trying to exert political pressure on politicians for its "special interest."

The show drew intense criticism from gay groups that, as one San Francisco politician put it, claimed the program "tells the viewer that what gay politics is about is hedonism," not the normal efforts of any special-interest group to gain power.

When they complained to the now-defunct National News Council, the watchdog group found that the gay

groups' criticism against Crile's show was "warranted."

Then came "The Uncounted Enemy," the first show Crile produced on his own. For those in the courtroom, who have watched the production at least twice, it is still riveting.

Before Westmoreland sued, he held an angry press conference denying the thesis of the show and saying Crile and narrator Mike Wallace had "rat-tlesnaked" him in their interview. But after the first shot, the general did not give up the battle. First came a TV Guide article that called the show a "smear." Then CBS' own ad hoc ombudsman, Burton Benjamin, investigated the broadcast, finding 11 instances in which Crile either had broken network rules or had been unfair.

Most of Benjamin's report was not allowed in this court case, but the jury has heard Crile defending the ways he edited the show, cropping quotes, editing out comments that tended to suggest any hesitation or confusion about the issue. When Westmoreland's closing witness, film editor Ira Klein, testified against Crile, he acknowledged that he grew so unhappy with Crile's ways that he talked to Don Kowet, coauthor of the TV Guide article.

"All these people behind him were smoldering about George," says one associate. "When Westmoreland held a press conference on this show, it flushed them all out. Then he put himself in an almost Nixonian position, admitting not the slightest mistake and giving lectures about how he did everything absolutely correctly. At that point, everybody just started turning on poor George."

After it is over, Crile is not expected to be fired from CBS, several network sources say. As long as CBS contends his program was true—and the network has recently called as witnesses a number of military and CIA officials to support the documentary's thesis—Crile will have a job. But he will always be watched. His superiors at CBS will be like the maintenance crews on a DC10 after a DC10 crash—even a double-check will not be enough before takeoff.

"You want to be somewhere where somebody wants you," Crile says, his tone betraying no sadness, no yearning. "What I would like to do is make documentaries, but my sense is that I can't think about that. You need a patron."

He laughs as he listens to himself. "I don't know whether it's possible."