



New York Times  
Editorial Page Editor  
**Gail Collins**

Fifteenth Annual  
John S. Knight Lecture

April 21, 2003      Kresge Auditorium      Stanford University



## **JOHN S. KNIGHT FELLOWSHIP AND LECTURE**

The 2002-03 academic year marked the 37th year of professional journalism fellowships at Stanford. The John S. Knight Fellowships are named for a distinguished American journalist whose major concern throughout a long career was the editorial quality of newspapers. The Knight Fellowships program each year awards fellowships to 12 journalists from the U.S. and up to eight from other countries. These journalists take a leave of absence from their jobs to spend the year at Stanford studying and attending special seminars. In 1988, with the help of the Knight Foundation, the Knight Fellowships Program began an annual lecture series aimed at bringing distinguished journalists and authors to campus.



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## GAIL COLLINS

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**G**ail Collins was named Editorial Page Editor for the New York Times in June 2001. Ms. Collins had been a columnist of the New York Times's Op-Ed page since September 1999. She was previously a member of the Times editorial board, which she joined in September 1995.

She was a columnist at New York Newsday from 1991-1995 and before that, at The New York Daily News from 1985 to 1991.

From 1982 to 1985, Ms. Collins was a financial reporter at United Press International in New York.

From 1977 to 1979, she was a freelance writer; a senior editor for Connecticut Magazine; a regular contributor to The Times; a weekly columnist for the Connecticut Business Journal; host of public affairs program for Connecticut Public Television, and instructor in journalism at Southern Connecticut



State College.

Founder of the Connecticut State News Bureau, Ms. Collins operated the bureau from 1972 to 1977, when it was sold. The CSNB provides coverage of the state capitol and Connecticut politics. When it was sold, it was the largest news service of its kind in the country, with more than 30 weekly and daily newspaper clients.

Ms. Collins received a B.A. degree in journalism from

Marquette University, Milwaukee, in 1967. She received an M.A. degree in government from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1971.

She is the author, with Dan Collins, of a book entitled "The Millennium Book," published by Doubleday in 1991, and "Scorpion Tongues," published by William Morrow in 1998. She is currently writing a history of American women.

### PREVIOUS KNIGHT LECTURERS

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**1989-90 — Taylor Branch**, author

**1990-91 — Peter Arnett**, Cable News Network

**1991-92 — Geneva Overholser**, Des Moines Register

**1992-93 — William Greider**, Rolling Stone

**1993-94 — Anthony Lewis**, New York Times

**1994-95 — Sylvia Poggioli**, National Public Radio

**1995-96 — Ellen Goodman**, Boston Globe

**1996-97 — Elizabeth Drew**, journalist and author

**1997-98 — Bob Woodward**, Washington Post

**1998-99 — Steven Brill**, Brill's Content

**1999-2000 — Garry Trudeau**, syndicated cartoonist

**2000-01 — Katrina Heron**, Wired

**2001-02 — Paul Steiger**, Wall Street Journal

**2002-03 — Gail Collins**, New York Times

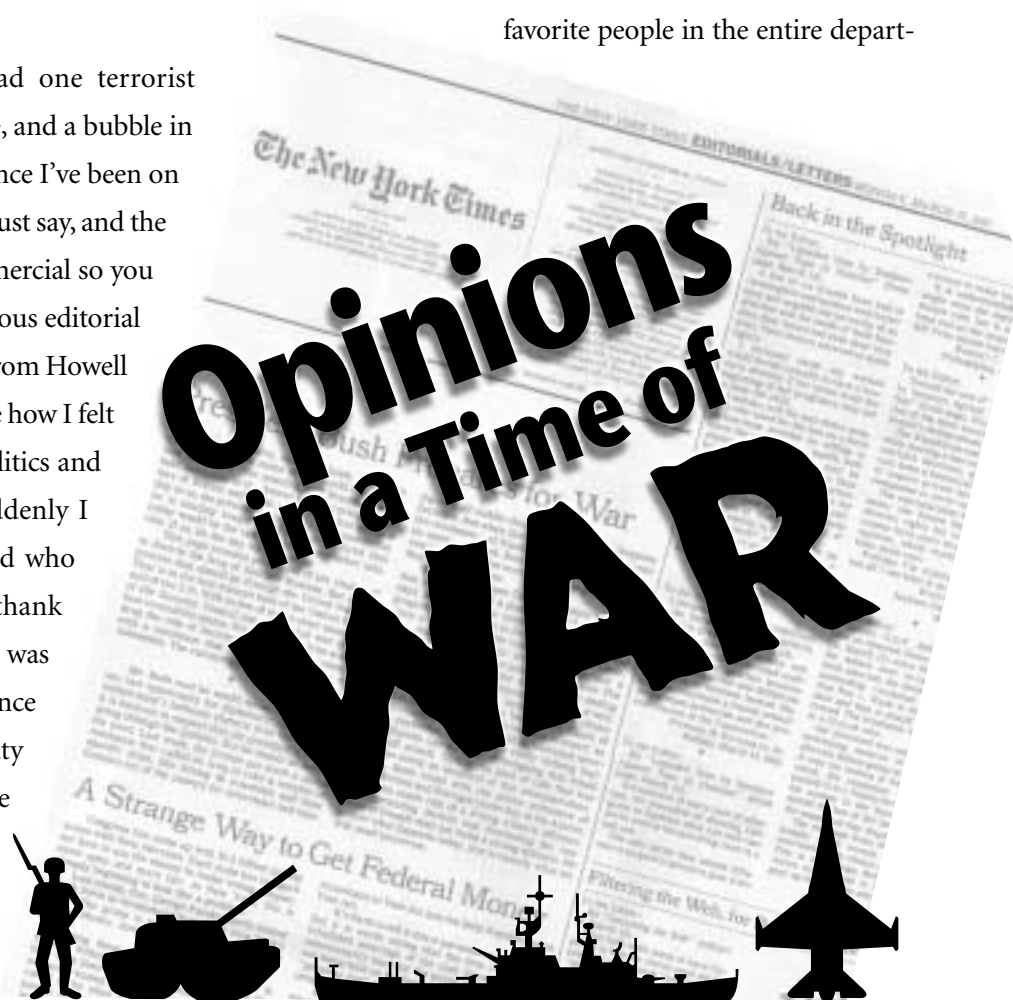
**T**hank you all for coming tonight. This is a great town. It is such a pleasure to be here tonight.

So much has been going on in the world, and the topic here is so open-ended, that I thought I would just sort of talk to you all as colleagues, as reporters of news and readers of news, about some of the things I have learned in the last year and a half. I was appointed editorial page editor, as Jim said, in the summer of 2001, and it was kind of a weird appointment. I had never been an editor before, but I really thought that since the country was obviously entering a really boring period that it would be useful to have a person who was very good at spinning boring stories into something interesting.

Imagine my surprise! We've had one terrorist attack, two wars, a crashed space shuttle, and a bubble in the Internet breaking all at once, ever since I've been on the job. It's been quite an education, I must say, and the first thing I've learned — this is a commercial so you have to forgive me — is what a stupendous editorial board I had been left when I took over from Howell Raines. Right after 9/11 you can imagine how I felt with my great expertise in domestic politics and state and local government. Then suddenly I realized I had two people on my board who had covered wars in Afghanistan — thank you God — and that my deputy editor was just completing a book on U.S. intelligence operations. I was blessed. And the deputy editor, by the way, is a Stanford graduate — Phil Taubman, the former editor of the Stanford Daily who is married to Felicity Barringer, The Times United Nations bureau chief who is also a

former editor of the Daily, whose son is now a student at Stanford. Also Andrés Martínez who is also on our board got his master's degree at Stanford, and Michael Newman who is one of our op-ed editors is also a Stanford alumni, and I can tell you I know a great deal more about the Stanford basketball team than any other person who was educated in Milwaukee has ever known.

Let me tell you just a little tad about the editorial department. We've got 15 people on the board and we have a seven-member staff who handles the op-ed contributions, and we have seven columnists and their assistants, and we have a four-person staff handling letters to the editor, and I have to tell you that these are my favorite people in the entire depart-



ment. Since the beginning of the great email revolution, the role of a letter-to-the-editor editor, especially at The New York Times, has been transformed. On the days after 9/11 they were getting 500 letters an hour, all people who just wanted to share their feelings and to express themselves in The Times, and the people — there are only four of them — they stayed all weekend, they wanted to read and open every one of these emails, and then to pick the twenty that seemed the best to them every day. The first weekend of the war in Iraq I found that the letters-to-the-editor editor, Tom Feyer, had been sleeping in the men's room overnight on Saturday night because he wanted to get those Sunday letters in and freshen the page for Monday. These are amazingly heroic people. The only time I walk past their office I sort of salute like that.

Anyway, I'm digressing completely.

What I wanted to talk to you about tonight is the role of opinion in American journalism. It's something I've been thinking about for a long time, but my recent experiences have convinced me that it's really important for the journalistic community to have a kind of a hard internal discussion about how we separate opinion from news. My newspaper, as Jim has noted, is not the only one who has come under attack, mainly from the right, for allegedly slanting the news to fit political opinions, and I would be perfectly happy to stand here all year telling you how much exception I take to that charge, but I do think that part of it stems from a growing confusion about the separate roles of objectivity and opinion in American newspaper.

I'd like to talk to you a little bit about that, and if you'll bear with me I want to go back a little bit into his-

tory. Early American newspapers, as many of you I'm sure know, were almost all editorial, with a little bit of shipping news stuck in on the side. There were news reports but they tended to be along the lines of theory rather than actual news. My favorite headline from the Colonial era was a column that was called "Important If True." When they gave me a column at The Times, Howell Raines said to me, "What would you like to name it?" And I said, "Oh, please, please, 'Important If True,' if you don't mind, sir." They were not amused by that.

But the actual point of most of the early American newspapers was to get an editor a government printing contract, or better yet, a government job, and you cannot blame the editors for this goal because readership at that point was very thinly scattered. One editor in New Jersey I remember said that being an editor was little better than starving, and I think he was right. The success story that everybody wanted to emulate was a guy named Duff Green who ran a paper called the United States Telegraph in Washington in the 1820s. He was a huge fan of Andrew Jackson, and among the many services that he performed for Andrew Jackson was one time during the campaign of 1828 he ran 10 full columns of type to explain how Jackson had inadvertently come to be living with his wife, Rachel, when she was still married to another man. He also made a noble effort to convince the American people that John Quincy Adams had had sex before he got married, which nobody would have believed in a million years, but anyway, after the election, which Jackson did win, Green was named the official printer for both houses of Congress, and governor of Florida, and his son became the minister to Russia. Now that's the sort of success that every journalist in that era wanted.

It was not really until the Civil War that newspapers started to hire people to go out and cover news, and if you forgive my narrow view of human history, I think of the next hundred years as sort of an effort to pen up opinion in the editorial pages. This was not accomplished easily, and I want to stop briefly at the Gilded Age, the post-Civil War era, because some of my very favorite headlines in the history of newspapers were written then. One of them appeared in the now-defunct paper in Chicago, and they ran long headlines then, sort of bank after bank. They left no space untouched when it came to headlines. This was about two Indiana politicians who had presidential ambitions — Oliver Morton and Thomas Hendricks. This was a news story, and I will let you try and guess which of the two of the writers secretly favored Hendricks, a man of the purist social relations. “Morton, A Foe to Society, a Seducer and a Libertine.” Second bank: “The Former’s Name Untrammelled by Lust, The Latter’s Reeking with Filth and Slime.” Third Bank: “A Few of the Hellish Liaisons All But Attempted Seductions by Indiana’s Favorite Stud Horse.” The doctrine of objectivity had not quite permeated the entire Chicago media at that time.

One more that I always love. This is from the Cincinnati Penny Press, my hometown, at a time when Grover Cleveland was running for President and being accused of fathering an illegitimate child. This is another news story. “Moral Monster. Grover Cleveland’s True Character Laid Bare, A Boon Companion to Buffalo Harlots.” The story about the illegitimate baby came from a paper called the Buffalo Telegraph, which was a short-lived paper that really took the scandal and ran with it. I read a number of copies of the Buffalo Telegraph, and it was sort of all-Grover’s-baby-all-the-time.

It was not until the twentieth century that newspapers started really cordoning off their editorial pages, and it really wasn’t until after World War II that people on the news side really absorbed the idea that you weren’t supposed to pick sides when covering the news, and I suspect in the future people will look back on the last half of the twentieth century as the heyday of objective journalism, when the division between opinion pages in newspapers were at their clearest.

I have a couple of theories about how objective journalism came to be. One was all about the economic structure of the media itself. In the nineteenth century most newspapers were small, they were undercapitalized, they operated in very competitive markets, and they had to yell amongst ten, twenty — fifty papers sometimes in some areas — all competing for attention. So you had to yell very, very loud to be heard, and you had to pander to your audience, which was at that time very politically partisan. You made most of your money on circulation, you were still hoping for that printing contract to come through, and you were basically the Buffalo Telegraph, no matter where you were.

But as the population grew more concentrated, then the newspapers got larger, it became more expensive to start them, and soon small cities only had one or two papers. Big cities had more but they relied on advertising, not circulation for most of their income, and advertisers tended to come in all sorts of political packages. It was easy to offend them and so while objectivity I think gave us great journalism, it also gave the business side assurance that the paper could appeal to a wide range of advertisers and readers. And the big media news of the last half of the twentieth century of course was

television, which by its very nature wanted to appeal to the broadest audience possible — to Republicans, to Democrats, to communists, to logical positivists — anybody they could get with a Nielsen button was fine by them. And of course they wanted to keep out of trouble with the regulators.

But along the way, of course, objectivity worked for journalism, too. The old journalism, in which the reporter was sort of a pipeline for the big shots, was a kind of a minimal public service at best. Objective journalism was a real profession, one that required an intellectual rigor to do it well, and a real passion for the truth. Long before the X-Files, they knew the truth was out there somewhere.

Those of you who are young and new to the business may not believe this, but reporters were absolutely national heroes after Watergate, and I remember in the '70s when I was getting started reading a report that said that every year the journalism schools of America were graduating enough people to fill ever single job in every single newsroom in the country, if the entire journalistic news force was wiped out. I don't know what happened to them all, but it was a terrible time to be trying to break into journalism, as opposed to now, of course, when it is very easy. Anyway, we're now in a whole new landscape. Our news pages have added more quasi-opinion in the form of analyses and appreciations and reports from the campaign trail and opinion columns have wandered off into the Metro section, the Business section, the Styles section. And since I spent some of the happiest times of my life writing one of those columns for various tabloids, I cannot possibly hate this. But the standards we used to decide what's news coverage are changing, and both

reporters and readers like it better. Readers like to read analysis, reporters like to write analysis. It's more fun and with fifty million different news options out there, we don't have to write down to our readers but we do have to try to be accessible to them.

Also, you have noticed that opinion is cheaper than hard news, especially in television where the hard news, traditional news collection, which is very expensive, is getting less time and less resources, while the extremely popular and deeply inexpensive world of talking heads, or yelling heads as the case may be, is getting more.

So let me remind you now why we bothered to take that trip through the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century's newspapers were shrill and sensational for the same reasons that cable television is. Right now the all-news channels are desperately trying to get the attention of a relatively small audience. There's only a few million people out there on a normal day that are going to watch anything on cable television, so in order to survive you just naturally have to yell louder and louder. I don't know if any of you have ever been a talking head. I have been a talking head. Usually you go into a basement. It's sort of like "Silence of the Lambs," I guess, when I think about it. You're in this empty basement, there's nobody else there, you're in a cement room and there's this one big eye of the camera staring at you, and you're sitting on a folding chair, and there's a little thing stuck in your ear that's telling you to make sure to jump in and argue, don't wait until you're called on. You have to yell at the other talking heads which are in other studios in other places, and if you get in there and mix it up, yell, scream, then you'll get a call back to come back. That's just the way they operate, and my prediction is that the cable news channels will get

louder and more aggressive until just one all-news network survives, at which point everybody will lower their voices and raise their ad rate.

What's happening with TV, though, is nothing compared to what's happening with the Internet. Of course there's a bunch of serious websites, most of them connected to newspapers or TV networks. But the vast reaches of the Internet operate back in that land of "important if true." It's like a big op-ed page with no editors and quasi-information that moves at the speed of light. At worst, it's really terrible. My colleague Tom Friedman talks a lot about running into young people, in the Arab world especially, who will explain to him that the CIA blew up the World Trade Center, and that all the Jews were told not to come to work that day, and when Tom tries to explain to them that this is all completely nuts, they say very sincerely, "No, no, I read it on the Internet." It's high tech, it's true.

In general, though it's not. It reminds me of a saloon at like 1:30 on Saturday morning. It's unregulated and it's going to be that way for a while. Some day it'll turn to something else, but right now the main thing we know about most of the Internet is that you can't demand a correction. It's very hard to even get one of them a talking head who's making an unpaid appearance on a cable news show and then disappearing into the ether.

If you're on the receiving end of this, it can drive you absolutely nuts. I will give you a really minor example that happened to us the other day. During the run-up to the war, one of our op-ed editors noticed that Laurence Eagleburger, who is the former secretary of state under the first President Bush, had spoken out and was

quoted in a lot of newspapers as being critical of the way that the Bush Administration was handling its foreign policy. He had written for us before, so one of the op-ed editors called him up and asked him if he wanted to expand on his remarks, and he said, no, he didn't think so, the war was about to start, and then they joked about how it wouldn't have quite the same news value if he had announced he suddenly decided the Administration was doing great. So then eventually he suggested a different piece, which would show, he said, how the invasion of Iraq would really be a big help in the war on terrorism, and the editor said that would be okay, and they made arrangements, and they ordered up some art for this new Eagleburger piece, and then his secretary called and said he was ill and wouldn't be able to finish it. Then on April 2 Mr. Eagleburger, totally restored to health, appeared on a Fox talk show when one of the hosts was decrying the way the liberal media was reporting the news on the war, and Mr. Eagleburger offered his experience with us as an example. He said, "About ten days ago, I was approached by The New York Times to write an op-ed piece. To make it very short, when I talked to them I was told, 'What we want is a criticism of the Administration.'" The host, Sean Hannity said, "They told you that?" And he said, "Yes, right, flat out. They told me they wanted a criticism of the administration. Needless to say, I did not write that op-ed piece." And that was that.

So Mr. Eagleburger's version immediately wound up on the Internet. A few hours later the publisher, the op-ed editor and my own office were flooded with emails from people demanding to know how we could have persecuted Mr. Eagleburger in this way. Mr. Eagleburger did not return my calls. We sent out dozens or maybe hundreds of letters to all these people, trying to explain what

had happened. The next day I discovered that former Mayor Ed Koch had gone onto the Bloomberg radio network where he is a commentator and replayed the entire thing with all of our evil-doing toward Mr. Eagleburger. So I called Mayor Koch, who answered as he always does, "Gail! Gail! How am I doing? How am I doing?" And I said, "Not well! Not well at all!" And I said, "Why didn't you call me? You could at least have asked!" And he said, "Well, I'm not a reporter. I'm a commentator."

So, you know, this is all okay. We fight these fights. I have a very big megaphone myself. I am definitely not a victim, and no one need feel sorry for me. But this does take me — and I know it's taken a while — but this does take me to the present. What we have here is a 24-hour cable coverage complete with yelling heads that makes big stories into hyperstories, which then go into this vast unedited Internet where the blogs and the websites get hold of them, and it then comes back to us in this blizzard of emails, and it's hard once in a while to keep your total balance.

But the part that bothers me, the part that seems to me most significant is that the news media has come to include in its ranks a large breed of advocates, mostly from the right, whose job is not uncovering the story but carrying their own particular cause further ever further up the hill. You will remember from the nineteenth century that we have had this before. Instead of a printing contract now you get a think tank berth of some sort or maybe a job as a network consultant, but we got through it then, I think we will get through it now. I do not want to drive Rush Limbaugh off the air.

But I do want to distinguish between real journal-

ism and partisan advocacy. I think that's very important, and I want us to be clear about the values that we need to hang onto in this brave new world or whatever the heck it is we're going into next. And one of the most important about these is the separation between opinion and news and the news section's commitment to objectivity.

The part of the advocacy media that we do have to fight is that part that tries to claim that we're all the same, just with different agendas. A lot of the battering that the traditional media comes in for I think is mainly an attempt to bring our journalism down to the level of pure opinion. And much as I love opinion, it's not the same thing. In some ways it is like this ongoing attempt to dub anyone who's critical of the political end of the current Iraqi effort as being against the troops. The other day William Kristol announced on Fox that The Times editorial page was hoping that the war would go badly, so I called him up. I'm really now into calling these guys up. I spend a lot of time now on the phone. I called him up and I said, "What the heck were you talking about? Show me one thing that suggests this ever." And he apologized as far as the editorials went, he said. I let it go at that. The editorial page, as far as the editorials went, we're not really the way he said it was.

But, as I said, we opinion people can take care of ourselves. We'll live with it. It's the separation of news from opinion that I want us to think about really defending. Anybody who has ever worked on the news side of a major newspaper knows that objectivity is not exactly a standard; it's more like a perpetual struggle to do the right thing. We know how many different facts a reporter has to choose from, and working on any given story how impossible it is to get something completely perfectly

right, and how many questions you have to ask just to get it as close as humanly possible. I think that most of the people who think that papers like The Times put their front page together in the pursuit of some editorial agenda did not come up in the tradition in which editorial and news are separate. And that is not necessarily surprising. Most countries don't separate their news the way we do, and most political commentators, as I've said, right now, are coming out of the advocacy press rather than the traditional media. In fact, more and more political commentators are innocent of any journalistic background whatsoever.

The trust of the readers and the objectivity of the news report, or at least the will for objectivity, the trust that we are trying every day to be as objective as possible is critical. And we have to defend it fiercely, wherever we're moving into in this great new era, this place that we haven't identified, where sources of information are so multitudinous that there's no way anyone can pose quali-

ty control. It seems to me that these times make it more important than ever that the public be confident that there are some places they can go and know that people are really trying to get it right, whatever way that comes out. If there's a vast information bazaar out there, somebody has to be doing the quality control.

I've often asked myself whether editorial pages, opinion pages are really necessary anymore given the wide range of analysis in other parts of the paper. I think they really are necessary for a whole bunch of reasons, but one is that having an editorial page defines opinion for the rest of the newspaper. I really do believe it would be harder to keep reporters from wandering into subjectivity if they weren't aware that there were editorial writers working that side of the street, and if that's all that I accomplish in my own little current incarnation, that's really good enough for me.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it. 