

## The New York Times

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# *Murray Fromson, Champion of Press Freedom, Dies at 88*

By Neil Genzlinger

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Murray Fromson, a well-traveled print and broadcast reporter who helped found the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press at a time when journalists faced hostility during President Richard M. Nixon's administration, died on Saturday in Los Angeles. He was 88.

His son, Derek, said the cause was Alzheimer's disease.

Professor Fromson, who also had a long career at the University of Southern California, joining its journalism faculty in 1982 and directing its journalism school from 1994 to 1999, covered many of the biggest news stories of his time: the Korean War, the Vietnam War, civil rights, the famine in Bangladesh and more.

One of those stories was the 1969 trial in Chicago of antiwar leaders on charges related to violence at the Democratic National Convention there in 1968. Mr. Fromson, working for CBS News at the time, became concerned about the aggressive stance being taken by John N. Mitchell, Nixon's attorney general, toward reporters and principles of journalistic confidentiality.

"Mitchell let it be known that he was contemplating the use of subpoena powers to summon reporters, to determine who and what they knew among the radical groups, and to determine the journalists' state of mind," Mr. Fromson wrote in describing the moment for the 35th anniversary of the founding of the Reporters Committee. "The Justice Department also talked of gaining access to reporters' notes, film outtakes and audiotapes. It was perhaps the most draconian wish list ever conjured up by the federal government."

He invited J. Anthony Lukas, a reporter for The New York Times, to Sunday brunch in December 1969.

"I proposed to Lukas that we organize a nationwide association of journalists who would fight subpoenas and vigorously defend our First Amendment rights," Mr. Fromson wrote.



Mr. Fromson, far left, an Associated Press staff member, looking on as President Syngman Rhee of South Korea, far right, reacted to the first Associated Press photographs directly received in Seoul. The photos were shown to him by Kim Dong Joon, president of the Korean Pacific Press. Also shown is an A.P. photo editor, George Seers. Associated Press

In March 1970, at the two men's urging, several dozen leading journalists met in Washington and formed the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, which in the years since has played a role in hundreds of press freedom cases in state and federal courts and has been an advocate for public right-to-know laws.

"Secrecy, manipulation of the facts, blatant lying, cover-ups and attempts to control what the public sees or reads are tools that the present administration is employing," Mr. Fromson wrote in 2005, when George W. Bush was president, "all reminders that the fight is far from over."

Mr. Fromson was born on Sept. 1, 1929, just before the Wall Street crash and the start of the Great Depression. His father, Philip Frankel, owned a taxi business. His mother, Frances (Segal) Frankel, had come to the United States from England at the urging of a sister for what Professor Fromson later described as an arranged marriage.

When the Depression hit, Philip Frankel left for the West Coast in search of work, according to a summary of his life by Derek Fromson and his sister, Aliza Ben-Tal. With his mother struggling during the Depression, young Murray was raised in three different foster homes. His parents

later reunited for a time, and in 1939 Philip relocated the family to Los Angeles. His parents divorced, his mother remarried, and at 17 Murray formally took the last name of his stepfather, Al Fromson.

A high school journalism teacher arranged an internship for him at The Los Angeles Times. Later, when Mr. Fromson was enrolled in college, The Times offered him a sportswriting job at its tabloid, The Mirror. He left school to accept the post, but that cost him his draft deferment.

The next thing he knew, he was drafted, he recalled in an oral history recorded for U.S.C.'s Living History Project.

He covered the Korean War for Stars and Stripes, the military newspaper, and after leaving the service he joined The Associated Press. In 1960 he moved to NBC, and while covering the 1960 Democratic convention in Los Angeles he met Dodi Grumbach; they married the next year. He went to CBS in 1962.

In 1965, Mr. Fromson reported on civil rights protests in the South, including a voting rights march in Selma, Ala.

"I was about 20 yards away when I saw John Lewis being beaten," he said in the oral history, a reference to the savage beating of the future United States congressman by Alabama state troopers.

Working out of Bangkok, he also covered the Vietnam War. At a program at U.S.C. in 2006 commemorating his retirement, footage of one of his Vietnam reports was shown. It was about the crash in April 1975, a few weeks before the fall of Saigon, of an American cargo plane that was full of Vietnamese orphans and American caregivers.

The children were being taken to the United States to be adopted, but the plane went down shortly after takeoff, killing many of those aboard. What Mr. Fromson did not say on the air, the U.S.C. presentation noted, was that his wife had been a potential passenger on the flight but was left off at the last minute.

Mr. Fromson also reported from Hong Kong, Moscow, New Delhi, Tokyo and other places overseas, and after joining U.S.C.'s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, he took a particular interest in fostering international journalism.

"Not only was Professor Fromson one of the great journalists of his time," Willow Bay, the school's current dean and a former television journalist, said by email, "he was also an extraordinary teacher and leader who built U.S.C. Annenberg's international journalism program from the ground up."

He and his wife also endowed a program at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev that sends journalists — known as Fromson fellows — to Israel.

In addition to his wife, son and daughter, he is survived by two grandchildren.

In a 2006 article in The New York Times, Professor Fromson wrote the final chapter in a story that had begun in 1967, when both he and a Times reporter, R. W. Apple Jr., had produced attention-getting reports quoting an unnamed general as saying that the Vietnam War was unwinnable — a startling statement at the time and one that enraged President Lyndon B. Johnson.

In the 2006 article, Mr. Fromson, with the general's permission, identified him as Frederick C. Weyand.

“Our reports,” Professor Fromson wrote, “demonstrated how important it was and is for journalists to offer pledges of confidentiality to credible sources in order to report the kind of stories officials normally are reluctant to discuss.”

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