

Subject: Re: BK takes on Post over hospital article
Date: 5/21/99 2:57 PM
Received: 5/22/99 10:52 AM
From: TwoB88@aol.com
To: michael.pppost@bigpond.com.kh

Michael:

You probably will not want to run this, and I guess I don't really blame you. I sent it to you, rather than the general Post address, because I don't want it to appear on the internet without you seeing it first. And because, despite the feelings I express in this letter, my resentment towards you is tempered by positive qualities I've seen in getting to know you a bit. I think it's obvious that I feel strongly about what I say below, and I wrote this letter with every intention of expressing these thoughts publicly. But I'd edit this letter a bit, and I won't make a big deal of it if you decided the Post declines to run it.

Barton

Comment

I was almost amused to see that Phnom Penh Post publisher-and-editor Michael Hayes still carries a personal vendetta against Bernard Krisher, the publisher of the Cambodia Daily. The fact that Hayes persists in trying to discredit Krisher and the Daily in any way possible is almost comical. Almost, but not quite.

Clearly Krisher has a consistent record of humanitarian accomplishment in Cambodia. Though Hayes might argue these accomplishments are not all they're cracked up to be, I don't think he generally disputes that Krisher gets things done. Instead, he complains that the methods Krisher uses are unfair.

It is true that Krisher can be pushy, pigheaded and impolite. I'd guess he's not above being a bit manipulative when aid projects are held up by "public servants" who specialize in bureaucratic foot-dragging. And it wouldn't surprise me if from time he's been less than entirely honest with a bribe-happy customs agent or solicitous policeman. If manners are what matter most to you, or if you see ethics in absolute terms, you will probably not see much good in Bernie Krisher, or you'll condemn him, as is your right. I haven't written this letter to persuade you not to.

I have a different opinion, however. Perhaps this is because I've watched a bug-eyed teenager, so scared of trouble he'd barely reveal the time of day, turn into a competent and confident reporter who is eager to print the truth, and proud to put his name by it. Probably my views were also effected by a woman I worked with in Cambodia who, over a period a few years, went from scrutinizing the floor whenever I spoke to her to scrutinizing the next day's front page and making sure that I knew about any errors that had been found. So, I have no objection to some pushiness, or a brusque word or two instead of a bow, if there is a chance they might help bring about similar changes.

Admittedly, the consequences of Krisher's actions are not always so clear cut. And his intentions might not always be entirely selfless. So I recognize that there are other reasons than shallow thinking about manners or methods that many people are apt to side with Hayes over Krisher. And again, I don't intend to try to rebut this line of thought here. In my opinion, the question of whether ends justify means can't be answered with absolutes anyway; instead, it should be considered case by case. Obviously, Michael Hayes believes that in the case of Bernie Krisher, the ends do not justify his modus operandi, and I have no problem with him expressing his opinion.

I do have a problem with he misleads readers or people listening him rant, and I am disgusted by his use of insulting insinuations to try sway opinions, and I do get pissed off when I see that Hess come no where near practicing what he preaches.

Towards the end of his irregular~and lengthy~response to a letter from Krisher that was published in the May (a reply to a letter usually clarifies points that the writer addressed, and does not raise new points and reserve the last word for the editor, as Hayes, reply does), Hayes strays from the topic in order to get in a shot at the Cambodia Daily. He implies that the papers independence has been compromised because, to paraphrase, its editors have failed to criticize the "Center for Hope" hospital established by their boss to provide free medical treatment to extremely poor Cambodians. I agree that there was a breach of ethics if in fact decisions were altered because of a relationship between a staff member and someone involved in a potential story~even if that someone happens to be the guy who signs the editors, paychecks. I,ll say right here, I hope Krisher looks into this and makes sure that his staff knows anyone is fair game. But Hayes also says that this hypothetical situation creates "the ultimate irony." Though as far as I,m concerned he failed to demonstrate any irony, he should probably be careful about what he tells readers to look for. Upon thinking about it I realized that it IS ironic (not to mention hypocritical) that while he publicly goes after the Daily for straying from strict journalistic principals, Hayes will, over a few drinks, blithely admit to publishing complimentary articles about a company because it has bought advertising space in the Phnom Penh Post. The real capper is, Hayes inadvertently created a situation here in which by pointing out supposed irony, he created irony. That, to me, is ironic.

But, broadening my scope, I see the "ultimate irony" of whole Hayes-Krisher roe (prematurely placed on the Daily's doorstep) in the fact that Hayes often counters the alleged unethical behavior of his nemesis by hitting below the belt himself. Before the Daily was even launched Hayes began spreading personal insults about Krisher, which, if not technically unethical, are at least irrelevant. Then he began misrepresenting supposed facts to underhandedly try to discredit Krisher and his paper, and I believe, in some cases, this has become full blown dishonesty. If he cares to debate any of this, I ask him to be good enough to provide me the space give some examples.

But looking for irony or figuring out whether Michael Hayes or Bernie Krisher is the true jerk is peripheral to real question at hand. That question is: Was the editor of the Phnom Penh Post acting responsibly and ethically when he published the article xxx, which criticized Krisher's hospital project? If Krisher's claim that the Post neglected to contact him for comment~even after he contacted them to make himself available~is true, then the answer is clearly "no." The same answer applies if the Post did not make an effort to obtain and include quotes that presented anything but negative opinions about Krisher and his work. And the most resounding "no" comes if the blatantly on-sided picture painted by this article was the result of editorial intention rather than an odd coincidence. The answers to these questions, which threaten to undermine the credibility of this once-estimable newspaper, should be the principal concern of the editor of the Post. And I believe that readers of that newspaper deserve some answers.

I opened by writing that I was almost amused by the most recent Hayes-Krisher exchange~but not quite. To Krisher's credit, for years he resisted letting himself be drawn into the scrap, and he advised Daily staffers to do the same. In fact, he primarily preached respect for the Post, and from day one he forbid the use of aggressive or predatory business tactics against Hayes, newspaper. So, the fact that Hayes immediately anointed Krisher Nemesis Number One is a bit ridiculous, and to see Hayes continuing to demean himself by slinging mud can remind one of slapstick. But after a while the comedy is lost in the spectacle of a man making wild charges at his tormentor but succeeding mostly in just splashing his own manure on himself. And when I remind myself that this is all part of a self-declared war against an imaginary enemy, the sight of a lone combatant storming ahead with another self-destructive campaign aimed at proving some insignificant claim, it all begins to seem depressingly pointless. By ultimately it is not insults or degradation or breaches of ethics

that took the fun out of the Hayes-Krisher farce; neglect, instead, evicted the last laughs from this show. As the first independent newspaper in the post-Khmer Rouge era, the Phnom Penh Post contributed an important ingredient to the volatile concoction~cooked up in Paris in 1991 and half-baked by UNTAC over the next couple of years~that eventually fermented into the Kingdom of Cambodia. That ingredient was a free press. I wasn't in Cambodia in those days, but I've been told that the Post was a good newspaper then; and people says that, as good papers should, it countered rumors, placed a few checks on government power and helped begin to balance the political scales. And as far as I know, the Post is still a decent newspaper today.

But the fact is, it could be better~a lot better. This is particularly unfortunate because Cambodia still desperately needs to raise journalistic standards in the country. If, over the last half dozen years, the publisher-and-editor of the Post had spent a bit more time improving the quality of his paper, the fear that haunts Cambodia might have faded a bit further into the past. And if he hadn't been quite as preoccupied with planning the next assault on his supposed expatriate rivals, Cambodians might have taken a few more steps towards prosperity, and freedom of the mind.

Some of you are probably ready to dismiss these statements as overly sanctimonious and presumptuous. Others are probably about to bar me from ever having another drink at the FCC. But before you do, let me say that I,d be the first to tell you it,s far from easy to produce any type of quality publication in Phnom Penh, and I don't doubt that Michael Hayes works quite hard on his fortnightly journal. I'm also ready to give credit where it is due by acknowledging that Hayes~unlike Krisher or myself or most of my expatriate colleagues~has made Cambodia his home, and this demonstrates an unusually deep commitment to the country.

But let me also call a spade a spade, and reiterate my belief that many of the hours Michael Hayes spent plotting the destruction of Krisher and the Cambodia Daily over the past six years or so were also hours he was neglecting more constructive opportunities at his own newspaper. And I'll repeat, rather than Krisher, it may be Cambodia that is paying the price.

That's not funny, it's a shame.

Sincerely,

Barton Biggs

Former Editor-in-Chief of the Cambodia Daily