

Remembering Wayne Barrett, the Journalist Who Saw Trump Coming Decades Ago

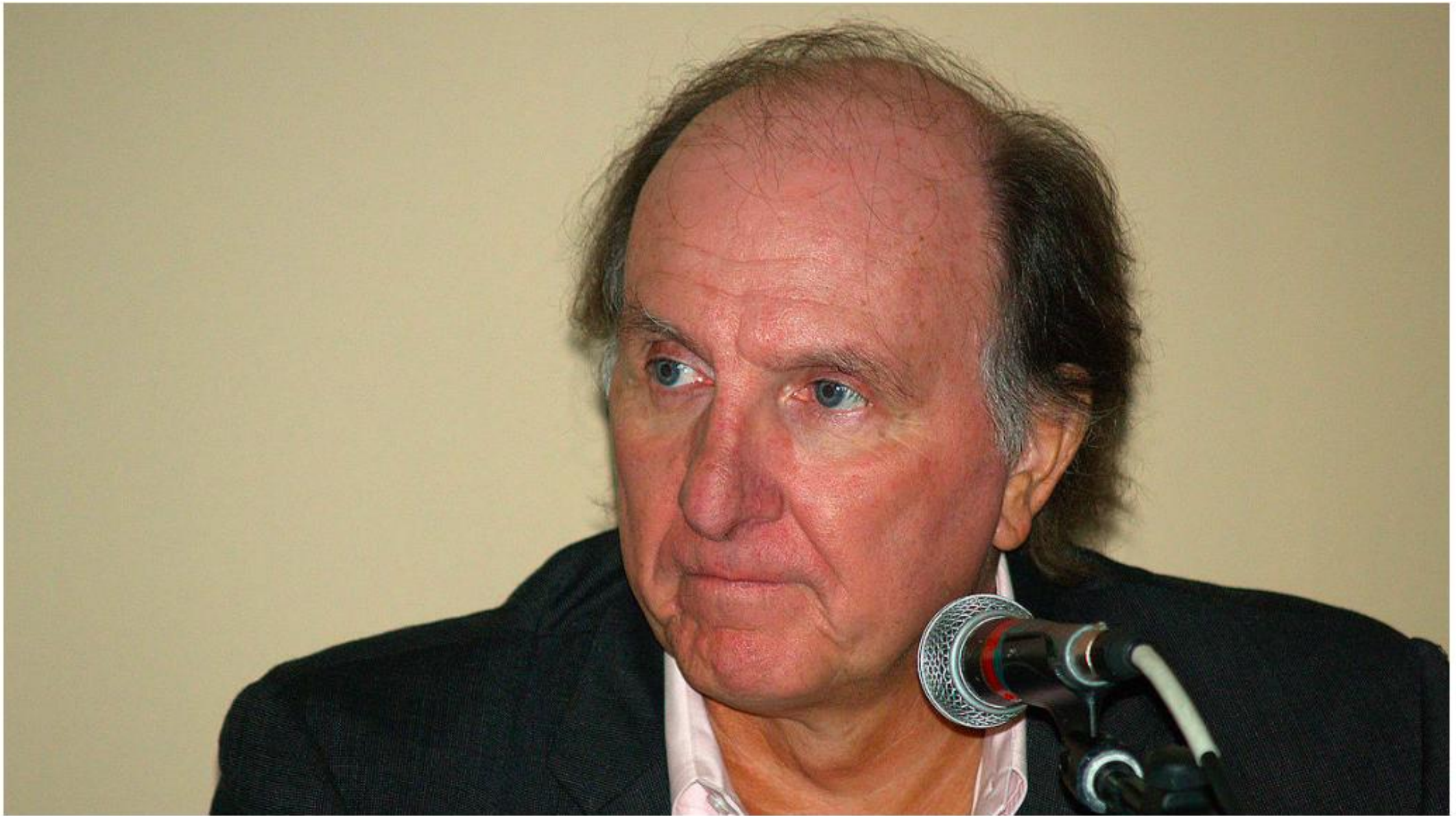
FACT FINDER

He taught us to dig. That the facts were knowable, written down and filed somewhere. That facts steadfastly accumulated could reveal what was hidden and be agents of justice.



Eileen Markey | Updated Oct. 10, 2020 2:58PM ET / Published Oct. 10, 2020 12:24AM ET





📷 David Shankbone

Adapted from Without Compromise: The Brave Journalism that First Exposed Donald Trump, Rudy Giuliani, and the American Epidemic of Corruption.

Wayne Barrett didn't report a word on the Trump administration. He died the night before the 45th president took office. But as the many scandals of the Trump presidency began to unfold, Barrett's foundational reporting on the New York City real estate developer was cited almost ritually, with Barrett inevitably identified as "legendary investigative reporter Wayne Barrett."

Barrett wrote in the *Village Voice* nearly every week for the better part of four decades, a steady accretion of knowledge silting up into hundreds of thousands of column inches. Collected here are just a few of those articles, accompanied by reflections from journalists who shared and continue his work. I've tried to select pieces that in their totality illustrate something of his craft and tell stories worth remembering at this long distance. The pieces included reveal the antecedents that shaped our present and the methods of a dogged reporter whose stock in trade was never conjecture or polemic but a relentless deluge of fact. Wayne Barrett believed in facts.



WAYNE BARRETT

He did not, I'm fairly certain, believe in ghosts. His mind was clear and rational. But pulling together this volume plunged me into a New York crowded with ghosts of a different city, of a country we sold, of a robust journalism stacked now in microfilm drawers. I took on this project at the request of Fran Barrett, Wayne's wife, because I wanted to make sure we didn't forget. I wanted to save something, the way you grab a photo from a burning building so you can remember what you had. It's not only about the past; memory is about the future, too, and what might yet be possible. My research began with a visit to the vestigial offices of the *Village Voice*. The *Voice*, like so many American newspapers, died a few years ago. But a remnant remains, two men in an office that once housed a crowd of unruly journalists, working like medieval monks to preserve the knowledge the *Voice* created. I walked up the wooden staircase (the elevator was out) to the seventh floor. Jazz was blasting. On the fire door was taped a page from the paper, circa 1985: a Jules Feiffer cartoon about a distracted media and Donald Trump, and a letter to the editor by a crooked Bronx pol complaining about Wayne Barrett.

To prepare this book, I was consumed with digging, first in the card catalogue that stands in a glass-doored alcove of the nearly empty *Voice* office and holds more cryptic secrets than the Sphinx, then in bound volumes of the paper, and finally in the special collections at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, where the pages that once filled the narrow office on the second floor of Barrett's Brooklyn rowhouse and sprawled into his basement now reside, neatly sorted. I amused myself with thoughts of Barrett, in his terrible tank top and dad jeans, blinking in the shadowless Texas sun, folder under his arm, loping walk, taller than you thought, laser-focused and eager. It would be more fitting for the records to be in some corner of Brooklyn where people still talk out of the corner of their mouths or in a ratty municipal archive. But no. In Texas there are 294 boxes of New York's history. They are what Wayne Barrett knew (at least what he wrote down. A library died with him).

Like a hundred other people between the early 1980s and 2016, I was a Wayne Barrett intern. He taught us all to dig. He taught us that the facts were knowable, could be acquired. That they were written down and filed somewhere. That facts steadfastly accumulated could reveal what was hidden and be agents of justice. That to be a journalist was to be an honorable person, a detective for the people (not their enemy). He was a notoriously tough boss, but also generous, sweet to his charges: buying us dinner, listening to our worries, coaching us, taking delight in our successes, offering visits to his beach house, checking in, connecting us to jobs, opening doors forever. So, I went to Texas not knowing what I was looking for, just that I wanted to understand why this old print reporter mattered so very much to so many of us and how that was connected to what's become of our country and our profession.

I sifted through the boxes, chasing his ghost, hoping to find the right clue. I wanted to understand what drove him, what made him so maniacal. Somewhere in here would be the answer to why he worked the way he did.



***“What I found in those boxes in the stony silence of the
Briscoe Center library was the story of New York’s
looting, a prelude to the nation’s.”***

Mostly what I found were printouts of Nexis searches. Lawsuits and depositions and grand jury reports no one was supposed to see. Audits and voter registration cards, presentencing reports and Donald Trump’s real estate license. The vulnerability study for Rudy Giuliani’s 1993 mayoral campaign. Manila folders and yellow legal pads with lists scribbled on them.

This is how Barrett worked: a task list that begat like a Hebrew Testament genealogy, and findings. The findings would eventually coalesce into a fact pattern. And then you had a story.

The files revealed that while his method was famously document-driven, it relied significantly on the physical touch. He didn't get what he learned from email queries to publicists; he got it from relationships built over years, source and confessor, a gruff voice on the phone and the man on your doorstep. He was willing to dig and notate payrolls and knock on doors of strangers and treat financial disclosure reports as beach reading to ferret out the truth. Almost none of it was online. He got it because he asked. And asked. And asked.

What I found in those boxes in the stony silence of the Briscoe Center library was the story of New York's looting, a prelude to the nation's. To read Barrett's long ribbon of work is to realize that year by year he documented the post-fiscal-crisis takeover of the city, our transformation from citizens to distracted serfs. In folder after folder was written the grubby story of NYC at the end of the century, in the years New York went from a working city and a creative powerhouse to a time-share for billionaires. The crooks, the hacks, the pols that fill the early years of Barrett's copy, they are picaresque nearly. You realize the guys who talked out of the side of their mouths at county dinners were just the front men. The ones who walked away with the bag money were the men in fine suits, gone home to abodes far above the city. Now they run for office and convince some of us they can save us.

BARRETT, WAYNE

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"Like Father, Like Son"

The saga of Donald Trump, New York City's
"number-one real-estate promoter"; and of
the empire he and his father have built.
The first in a 2-part series.

BARRETT, WAYNE

page 1
1/22/79

"Donald Trump Cuts the Cards"

The wheeler-dealing behind developer
Donald Trump's acquisition of New York
City's \$400 million convention center site.

Barrett began working as a reporter in 1970s New York. It's an era emblazoned in public consciousness by images of gutted, burnt-out buildings, piles of refuse and disastrous-looking subway cars—shorthand for crime and ruin. But when the image of crime in 1970s New York is daguerretyped into our memory, it should be this one: a group of white men in suits gathered around a fine conference table, divvying up the spoils and congratulating themselves on their good work. They laid the groundwork for the impossible city we now live in, determining that the gravest threat NYC faced was that too few millionaires felt comfortable in its environs. They repurposed the mechanisms built to relieve poverty and direct aid into neighborhoods starved by segregation instead into stimulus for the already rich. It was an organized looting.

With New York again facing acute financial uncertainty in the COVID-induced recession, and profiteers circling, ready to smash and grab, the lessons of Barrett's work are urgently relevant. In the restructured city, Donald Trump slimed up from the Queens sewer. The terrible truth held in those boxes in Texas is this: Donald Trump has 1,000 fathers, most of them respectable people. Most of them, it being New York, Democrats. Hugh Carey and Richard Ravitch. Mario Cuomo and Andrew. Ed Koch. The City Planning Commission and the Department of Taxation. Of course, Roy Cohn and Roger Stone. John Zuccotti (yes, fittingly, the Occupy Wall Street park is named for him). They were aware by 1979 of Donald Trump's court-documented racism and corruption. It didn't dissuade them from cutting him deals. There is nothing unusual or unique about Donald Trump. He's the logical outgrowth of our abandonment of the public good, a monster of our own making. The old clubhouse machine transmogrified into the global money set. Barrett didn't rant about this. But he did rage about it, painstakingly acquiring facts and marshaling them into column inches.

Barrett could document these crimes because he was securely employed. He was union-represented at a publication that each week fell with a thump on the mayor's doorstep. And if he didn't nab the offending party this week, he'd be back next week. As knowledge became a delta, he could stand on it and see, pull memory to inform the next story, link one scam to its cousin. He could report this way because his focus was local, particular and specific details built stories, one after the other.

The city and country were better when there were more reporters working this way. Barrett didn't have to attract followers or cite metrics or consider shareability or even what the reader wanted. The reader wants food photos. But also, somehow, democracy.

The relationship between real journalism and healthy democracy is fairly straightforward. As America's and New York's news industry atrophied, poisoned by the same caprice that looted the city, readers distracted into digital entertainments that make oxygen for manipulation and propaganda, we became the type of country that could elect Donald Trump.

There is something about living under this president and in this distracted milieu only as big as our phones that has made us feel that the country is rotten and we must be too. That we got what we deserved.

Barrett thought differently.



“Most reporters with enough knowledge of inside politics to chronicle the tawdry business come to accept it as a game. They trade their outrage for cynicism. But Barrett never shed his outrage—or his hope.”

On my last day in the archive I was deep in Barrett's past, transported into his 1970s life in Brownsville, Brooklyn—he wrote poetry!—when I found the photos, notes, and draft for his first Village Voice feature. It was about a venal Brooklyn pol who eventually went to prison for turning the local school district into his personal bursary. Barrett and Fran had struggled beside black radicals to maintain local control of that district, to make it one that took the education of its children seriously. Sam Wright turned it into something grubby. Barrett's ur-task list stretched in a dozen directions, toward lease records and bills for office furniture and the arrest reports for people who broke into stores during the blackout of 1977.

Brownsville in the late 1970s was devastatingly poor, stripped bare by redlining and racism, the fiscal crisis and hopelessness. People were working together in a dozen ways to try to make it better, and here was some politician thinking he could line his own pockets. This last box held the notes of a young man whose outrage was fresh.

What he learned in Brownsville fed a fierce clarity that would keep Barrett focused for 40 years. While he eventually moved out of the neighborhood, he never really left. Or at least it didn't leave him. Most reporters with enough knowledge of inside politics to chronicle the tawdry business come to accept it as a game. They trade their outrage for cynicism. But Barrett, who knew where the bodies were buried and was fierce and difficult and prone to roaring, never shed his outrage—or his hope. He believed we deserved better. He thought we were entitled to honest leadership beholden to the common good. In our governance, in our journalism. In our expectation that it can be better. This is the photo I wanted to save from the burning building.

There in the last box, in Barrett's tight, surprisingly loopy script, was a task particular to the Sam Wright story, but it read like a motto: "Get the list of looters. Particularly those who've pled."



Eileen Markey