

A burr under apathy's saddle

WASHINGTON — Folks who can't handle too much truth have been relieved of a major burr under their saddles.

Of all the fellow commentators to whom I have paid the high honor of "Dang, I wish I'd said that first," Molly Ivins ranked at the top.

Now she's gone. The Texas-based syndicated columnist died Wednesday at age 62 after battling breast cancer since 1999. She fought it with the relentless energy she devoted to crusades against numerous other diseases, most of them political.

Her voice was that of the Southern progressive, a courageous breed of people who won my respect and admiration since the rough days of the civil rights revolution in the 1950s and '60s. They love their home region too much to leave it alone, even when they must risk life, limb and reputation in their efforts to save it from its own worst impulses, customs and traditions.

"I believe all Southern liberals come from the same starting point—race," Ivins once said. "Once you figure out they are lying to you about race, you start to question everything."

Yet, Southern liberals transplanted to some other parts of our vast country can sound like conservatives. When Ivins saw anybody's conceit running amok, she could be an



Clarence Page

equal-opportunity tweaker. She wrote: "What is a teenager in San Francisco to rebel against, for pity's sake? Their parents are all so busy trying to be non-judgmental, it's no wonder they take to dyeing their hair green."

But she is best known for her slings and arrows against the outrages of political rascals and hypocrites, particularly in her home state: "Good thing we've still got politics in Texas—finest form of free entertainment ever invented."

It is one of the great ironies of our profession that her national star ascended swiftly with the election of President Bush. Just as Rush Limbaugh soared with President Bill Clinton, the nation turned to Ivins for alternative insight into the man she dubbed "Dubya" and "Shrub," whom she first knew in high school.

They didn't hang out in the same cliques, she would say. She was 6 feet tall, big-boned and growing up in an affluent Houston neighborhood; those were awkward years for Ivins. "I spent my girlhood as a Cly-

desdale among thorough-breds," she recalled.

Wit took her a long way, saving her from the fate of many other progressive columnists. The mailbags and e-mail boxes at the Chicago Tribune and a reported 300 other newspapers that carried her column will be a bit quieter without Ivins for readers to argue about.

"I've noticed a lot of complaining about Molly Ivins recently," a suburban Chicago reader wrote in the Tribune last fall. "The complaints are getting stronger as the Bush presidency worsens. It is hard to make a terrible mistake and have the disastrous results pointed out to you in the paper each week."

Having been fortunate enough to chat with her a few times over the years, I can assure those who thought she had two horns and a tail that she was quite human. "I believe in practicing prudence at least once every two or three years," she said. If that.

She was an old-school reporter, after graduating from ritzy Smith College, of all places. She covered the police as a reporter in Minneapolis in the 1960s and later covered the always-interesting Statehouse in Austin, Texas. She came up during a time when it certainly did not hurt a woman to have a thick skin, dogged determination and a well-cultivated sense of humor.

I don't think she relished the

hate that some adversaries in her audience directed at her. She understood that to be the price for stirring the apathetic out of their complacency.

Even when they don't agree with you, readers tend to appreciate knowing where you stand. Like an editorial cartoon, Ivins' views were as obvious as black and white, no wishy-washy grays, but almost always with a few laughs. Sometimes when things get really bad, humor is our only salvation.

"It's hard to argue against cynics," she opined. "They always sound smarter than optimists, because they have so much evidence on their side."

Yet, I shall always remember her softer side.

The last time I saw Molly, she was telling my wife in a soft but firm no-nonsense voice to stop putting off her annual mammogram. As much as we think of her political side, moments like that revealed her basic concern not only for the public, but also for people.

Molly had been waging her own battle against cancer yet was eager to put out another book. She didn't make it to that goal.

Her political voice has been silenced, but her influence is too valuable to forget.

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