

The life, work, and enduring legacy of a social activist-photojournalist as reconstructed by a daughter

ALL AVAILABLE LIGHT

The Life and Legacy of Photographer Ted Polumbaum

by Judy Polumbaum

Over his highly successful four-decade career as a freelance photojournalist, Ted Polumbaum did about 400 assignments for the legendary *LIFE* magazine, on subjects ranging from politics, religion, science and medicine to natural disasters, sports, and the arts. He also worked regularly for *Time*, *Fortune*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Look*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *People*, Time-Life Books, and many other publications.

Yet he never planned to be a photographer. That destiny was thrust upon him after he was blacklisted from news reporting.

ALL AVAILABLE LIGHT: *The Life and Legacy of Photographer Ted Polumbaum* (McFarland Press, fall 2021, print ISBN: 978-1-4766-8660-8, e-book ISBN: 978-1-4766-4407-3) sheds light on Ted's life, livelihood, and the times in which he lived and worked. Drawing on personal letters, family anecdotes, travel records, interviews, historical research, collective memories, and the vast archive of images her father left behind, his daughter Judy presents the story of a man of remarkable courage, conviction, and compassion who was also a gifted photographer and a devoted dad.

“As a photojournalist, my father bore witness to movements for peace and justice over nearly half a century,” Judy Polumbaum writes. “As a citizen-dissident, he acted upon his conscience and beliefs. As a man both of and ahead of his times, he saw much progress, but never enough.”

In the spring of 1953, ten years after being drafted out of his freshman year in college to go to war and five years after finally earning his BA in History from Yale as an Army veteran, Ted Polumbaum was focused on his budding career in news (at the time, he wrote the late-night television newscast for United Press in Boston) and his growing family. He and his wife, Nyna, had one daughter, with a second (Judy) on the way. McCarthyism was still riding high, and Ted was summoned to Washington DC to face the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) at hearings into “Communist subversion in education.” At Yale, he'd joined the John Reed Club, one of the many innocuous progressive organizations targeted by the inquisition. The inquisitors wanted him to name names.

Challenging HUAC's right to inquire into his personal or political beliefs, Ted took the Fifth Amendment and chastised the congressmen for trampling on the Bill of Rights. His defiance cost him his job. Unemployed, blacklisted, and needing to support a wife and two kids, he returned to a childhood hobby: taking pictures.

Filled with both well-known and never-before-published images from Ted Polumbaum's professional and family archives, **ALL AVAILABLE LIGHT** revisits key assignments and experiences that shaped Ted's political views and commitment to social justice.

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Among the highlights:

- Ted's recurring "Kennedy duty" as a Boston-based freelance photographer—notably, Ted was the only photographer with Jackie at the Kennedy compound in Hyannis Port, Cape Cod, on the night Jack won the Democratic nomination for President.
- Ted's immersion in Freedom Summer, from his most-reproduced photograph—a line of the volunteers, Black and white, arms linked, singing "We Shall Overcome" alongside buses bound for Mississippi—to his stirring interviews with civil rights workers, brave young women and men who were routinely harassed and sometimes attacked and beaten by local racists.
- Ted's coverage of powerful protests against the Vietnam War, including the grand spectacle mounted by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, led by future US Senator and Secretary of State John Kerry, in May 1971: a march from Concord to Lexington to Boston Common, tracing Paul Revere's ride in reverse to decry the country's wasteful and immoral sacrifices.
- Ted's fascination with Chile, from his first trip to Santiago to report on the debates, struggles, social progress and backlash surrounding the election of socialist leader Salvador Allende as president to the aftermath of the US-backed military coup three years later and the long period of repression that followed.

Along with celebrating Ted Polumbaum's work, Judy Polumbaum opens a window into her father's strained relationship with his domineering father, a longtime tobacco company executive who lost all his wealth and died a pauper; his loving marriage to kindred activist Nyna; the challenges of raising his first daughter, Miki, diagnosed with autism at a time when few were familiar with the term; and the later pain of watching his second, adored daughter Judy battle anorexia. The book also explores how Ted squared his political involvements with the requisites of his occupation – the photojournalist, like the journalist, was supposed to remain "objective" and impartial. "To the extent possible, Ted separated his livelihood from his opinions. On assignment, he was a keen, alert observer, with specific tasks to fulfill. As himself, with or without cameras, he could be an interested party, an affected soul, a participant."

Ted Polumbaum died in 2001, before the terror of 9/11, after battling a baffling brain ailment that only recently has begun to be understood. He was 76. After his death, his widow Nyna donated his archives to the Newseum – best known for the great museum of news on the Washington DC mall that closed at the end of 2019. The Newseum's collections endure, however, as online programming, traveling exhibits and other activities continue; and the Ted Polumbaum archives remain the organization's single largest holding by an individual photographer.

A tribute to a great photojournalist and the historic images that outlive him, **ALL AVAILABLE LIGHT** also is an intimate portrait of an exceptional father and a true patriot. The verdict is clear, inspiring, and all the more relevant today: "Ted was an American through and through. His patriotism had nothing to do with bigotry, chauvinism, superiority, or domination. His loyalties lay in conscience, and in willingness to go against conventional wisdom when conscience dictated."

About the Author

Judy Polumbaum is professor emerita in the University of Iowa's School of Journalism and Mass Communication, where she taught for nearly three decades. A longtime writer and scholar of China's mass media, she was the first Western researcher to do fieldwork focusing on post-Mao journalism in mainland China. She now makes her home in Nevada with her husband and two canine comedienne Beagle rescue sisters.