

## Lewis H. Lapham, Longtime Editor of Harper's, Dies at 89

Born into a patrician family, he used Harper's and later his own Lapham's Quarterly to denounce what he saw as the hypocrisies and injustices of a spoiled United States.

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Lewis H. Lapham in 2009 in the Manhattan offices of Lapham's Quarterly, a journal of history and literature that he founded after retiring from Harper's Magazine in 2006. Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

## Lewis Lapham, editor who revived Harper's magazine, dies at 89

He turned Harper's into what he called a "theater of ideas," promoting emerging voices including David Foster Wallace, Christopher Hitchens and Fareed Zakaria.

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Editor and author Lewis H. Lapham in 2005. (Paul Hawthorne/Getty Images)

By John Otis  
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By **Robert D. McFadden**

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Lewis H. Lapham, the scholarly patrician who edited Harper's Magazine for nearly three decades, and who in columns, books and later his own magazine, Lapham's Quarterly, attacked what he regarded as the inequities and hypocrisies of American life, died on Tuesday in Rome. He was 89.

His death was announced by his children. A longtime resident of Manhattan's Upper East Side, he had been living in Rome with his wife and other family members since January.

The scion of a shipping and banking family whose forebears included a founder of Texaco and a mayor of San Francisco, Mr. Lapham (pronounced LAP-um) was a nationally respected journalist whose commentaries on politics, wars and the wealthy were disparaged by conservative critics but often likened by admirers to the satires and cultural criticisms of H.L. Mencken and Mark Twain.

Lewis H. Lapham, the innovative editor who revived Harper's magazine and penned books and essays that skewered the American upper class from which he sprang, died July 23 in Rome. He was 89.

His family confirmed the death but did not cite a specific cause.

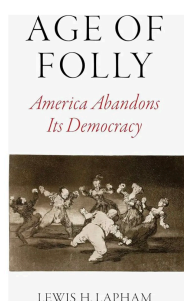
Born into a family with a long history in statecraft and industry — relatives included the secretary of war for Thomas Jefferson and a founder of what became the oil giant Texaco — Mr. Lapham retained the aura of extreme privilege. On his tall, trim frame, he wore bespoke suits, accessorized with pocket squares and cuff links. He could often be found, drink in hand and chain-smoking Parliament cigarettes, at A-list galas and restaurants in New York.

At the same time, he positioned himself as an often-scornful observer of his own aristocratic heritage, leading to quips that he was “the Brahmin who got away.”

After a decade as a newspaper reporter and magazine writer, Mr. Lapham was the managing editor of Harper's from 1971 to 1975 and the editor in chief from 1976 to 1981 and from 1983 to 2006. He offered a blend of high culture and populism: the fiction of John Updike and George Saunders mixed with reports on abortion fights, global warming and the age of terrorism — generally, but not always, with a progressive eye.

Politically, Harper's on Mr. Lapham's watch was increasingly critical of American domestic and foreign policies. His columns denounced both President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush, and he called for the impeachment of Mr. Bush for what he regarded as deceptions that led the nation into war in Iraq.

Mr. Lapham's last book, "Age of Folly: America Abandons Its Democracy" (2016), a collection of columns, argued that the election of Donald J. Trump was the culmination of decades of degradation of United States democracy under a number of Republican administrations, ending in what he called a dysfunctional plutocracy of the superrich, by the superrich and for the superrich.



Mr. Lapham's last book, a collection of columns published in 2016, argued that the election of Donald J. Trump was the culmination of decades of degradation of United States democracy.  
Verso

In 2006, Mr. Lapham retired from Harper's and founded his quarterly, an intellectual journal that used the lessons of history and the persuasions of literature to dissect modern problems. Each issue of the magazine was devoted to one subject — war, crime, money, medicine — and its content ranged from the classical writings of the ancient world to contributions from modern celebrities.

He aspired to be a historian and was studying the subject at the University of Cambridge when, in 1956, the Suez crisis broke out as well as the anti-Soviet uprising in Hungary, and he found himself drawn to the thrill and immediacy of documenting history as it unfolded.

"I couldn't imagine anything more exciting to do than to try to put words on paper," he [told](#) the design and culture website Print, describing journalism as a form of public service and a "heroic" forum for ideas.

But by the time Mr. Lapham joined Harper's as a contract writer in 1971 — after assignments for Life magazine and the Saturday Evening Post — the venerable monthly founded in 1850 was losing readers and advertisers.

In a dispute with the owner over editorial direction and budgetary conflicts, the entire staff except for the art director followed the beloved top editor Willie Morris out the door, a mutiny that Mr. Lapham likened to "one of those Shakespeare plays where all the important people kill themselves."

Although he had only been to the Harper's office twice, Mr. Lapham was suddenly promoted to managing editor by the magazine's owner, the Minneapolis Star and Tribune Co., which had taken issue with Morris's free-spending ways and articles like [Norman Mailer's](#) 90,000-word report on a Vietnam War protest march.

Mr. Lapham turned the once reliably liberal Harper's into what he called a "theater of ideas." He published essays by leftists but also reached out to conservatives such as [Irving Kristol](#), Norman Podhoretz and Ken Adelman. He ran articles questioning affirmative action and once put [William F. Buckley Jr.](#), the right-wing editor of the National Review, on the cover.

“The idea was to bring the voices of the past up to the microphone of the present,” Mr. Lapham told The New York Times in 2009 when asked about his magazine’s mission. “History doesn’t repeat itself,” he said, “but it rhymes.”

Mr. Lapham was a good fit at Harper’s: an editor of bedrock literary and historical learning and an elegant writer with common sense, taking long views that seemed to transcend the divisions of modern life. Founded in 1850, Harper’s is the nation’s oldest continuously published monthly, covering politics, culture, finance and the arts. Writings by Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontë sisters, Herman Melville and Willa Cather, among many others, have appeared in its pages.

Intellectually, Mr. Lapham was an aristocratic populist on the left, just as [William F. Buckley Jr.](#), who founded the conservative National Review, was on the right. Both were Yale-educated editors and wordsmiths, and both were frequently seen on television: Mr. Buckley as the host of “Firing Line” and Mr. Lapham as the host and writer of a six-part PBS series, “America’s Century,” in 1989 and host of the weekly PBS series “Bookmark” from 1989 to 1991.



Mr. Lapham in 1989, the year he was host and writer of a six-part PBS series, “America’s Century.” Yvonne

“What drew Lapham to these writers was his taste for heresy — he’s always loved starting fights on the playground and then bringing them back into the classroom,” media critic Jack Shafer [wrote](#) decades later in Slate. “Publishing contrary pieces gave Harper’s an ecumenical edge.”



Mr. Lapham in London in 2005. (Sang Tan/AP)

Mr. Lapham, who became Harper’s top editor in 1976, also encouraged writers to provide their personal takes on U.S. politics, world affairs, science and the arts. He published some of [Tom Wolfe’s](#) most incendiary work, including “The Painted Word,” his 1975 attack on modern art, and was an early promoter of Annie Dillard’s meditative essays on nature.

“He pushed the idea that the memoir form might influence *any* piece — an essay, report, investigation — and make it more, rather than less, true,” Robert S. Boynton, head of the literary journalism program at New York University, told [Smithsonian magazine](#). “He attacked the false gods of ‘objective journalism,’ and showed how much more artful and accurate writing in the first person could be.”

There were also blunders. Because he objected to the book’s many unnamed sources, Mr. Lapham refused to excerpt “All the President’s Men,” the soon-to-be bestseller by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward about the Watergate break-in that led to President Richard M. Nixon’s resignation.



Both were also guests together, sometimes as part of a group, on televised discussions of current events — although they never directly debated each other. “We appeared on panel discussions, but they were conversations, not head-to-head debates,” Mr. Lapham said in an interview for this obituary in 2018.

In 1980, Harper’s, which was losing \$1.5 million a year, nearly folded. Its owner, the Minneapolis Star and Tribune Company, set a date to end publication. Hoping to keep it going, Mr. Lapham organized a group to buy Harper’s, but its offer was rejected, and he put out a last issue. But then the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Atlantic Richfield Company and its founder, [Robert Orville Anderson](#), stepped in with funds to establish the nonprofit Harper’s Magazine Foundation, which still publishes Harper’s.

Mr. Lapham left Harper’s in 1981, partly in a disagreement with the foundation over the magazine’s direction. His return, in 1983, was based on his plan to restructure the magazine to distinguish it from its rival The Atlantic Monthly, and to raise circulation and advertising revenues.

Instead of long articles and literary pieces, he ran a few original reports and more cultural criticism, fiction, poetry and several innovative features, like “Harper’s Index,” which used statistics as editorial commentary; “Readings,” excerpts from essays, letters and speeches; and “Annotations,” a selection of annotated texts, including White House news releases and the trivia of a PBS program schedule.

What’s more, Harper’s continued to bleed cash. It was on the verge of closing in 1980 when it was bought by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the oil company Atlantic Richfield. The new owners set up a nonprofit foundation to underwrite the magazine.

The next year, the board reportedly pushed Mr. Lapham to resign in part because some found the magazine’s contents lacked liveliness and were too often harshly critical of American society. When his successor, Michael Kinsley, also left amid clashes with the board, Mr. Lapham was lured back in 1983 with a carte blanche mandate to redesign Harper’s.



Mr. Lapham at a 2006 panel discussion in New York with actor Bob Balaban and “Daily Show” correspondent Ed Helms. (Paul Hawthorne/Getty Images for TFF)

“The board brought him back because the magazine started going downhill after he left, and they didn’t want to ruin the Harper’s brand,” said Samir Husni, a magazine industry analyst. Mr. Lapham, he added, “gave the magazine its identity.”

In his second stint as editor, Mr. Lapham tried to distinguish Harper’s from competitors, like the New Yorker and the Atlantic, by cutting back on windy articles and by inventing several short, eye-catching features.



Mr. Lapham also wrote a monthly column — called “Easy Chair” before 1981 and then “Notebook” — in which he ranged over many subjects, often targeting upper-class frivolities, government corruption and what he called national obsessions with money, power and material possessions. He sprinkled his essays and talk with allusions to Goethe, Cicero, Hamilton, Madison, Montaigne and the classics.

“I think the argument is not liberals-conservatives, Democrats-Republicans or left-right,” he told The Christian Science Monitor. “The argument is between past and future. That’s where a line forms: what is regressive and what weighs you down, the too-old or stultified or barbarous notions, and what takes you forward and gives you a hope of discovering a change, the freedom of the imagination.”

In one “Notebook” column, in 1995, Mr. Lapham took on what he labeled “reactionary chic” in the world of culture:

*At presumably higher elevations of culture, the air was always thick with Christian piety and bourgeois sentiment. Herman Melville was condemned to obscurity, Mark Twain was obliged to present himself as an amiable clown, and Edith Wharton, together with Henry James and Ezra Pound, left for Europe.*

*When tellers of the sad Republican tale agree to take questions on the subject, it turns out that the lost culture for which they grieve is the culture best expressed by the sensibility of the 1950s, the musical comedies of Rodgers and Hammerstein, the history of the world as told by Disney and Time-Life, the list of great books that everybody owns but nobody has read.*

The “Annotation” section deciphered random documents and images — a census form, a White House press release, a Carnegie Hall concert ticket — through critical comment and explanatory diagrams. “Harper’s Index” came about after Mr. Lapham noted that news stories were often built around numbers. He stripped away the words to produce a single page of numbers and unusual facts often juxtaposed to startle or amuse readers.

One Index entry dryly stated: “Pounds of plutonium and highly enriched uranium that are missing from U.S. inventories: 9,600 pounds. Pounds of plutonium needed to make an atomic bomb: 15.” Another put the number of “telephone-related injuries” in 1985 at 11,000. The Index was widely imitated and turned into a series of books.

Mr. Lapham filled out Harper’s with poetry, fiction, and in-depth reports, often by emerging voices such as [David Foster Wallace](#), [Christopher Hitchens](#) and Fareed Zakaria. [Barbara Ehrenreich](#) recalled how a long lunch with Mr. Lapham led her to write two Harper’s essays on the struggles of America’s working class, and that formed the basis for her best-selling 2001 book “Nickel and Dimed.”

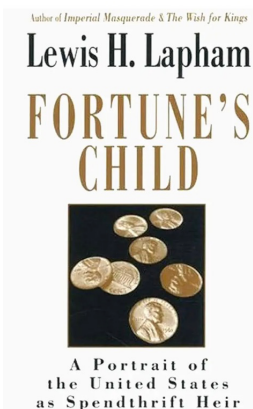
Mr. Lapham led off each edition of Harper’s with one of his own essays, written longhand with a Waterman pen, often about the abuse of privilege and power and the dangers facing America’s democracy.

Although the magazine continued to lose money, circulation nearly doubled to 220,000. Under his watch, Harper’s won the National Magazine Award, the industry’s highest honor, many times, including in 1995 for Mr. Lapham’s essays, which were praised for their “exhilarating point of view in an age of conformity.”



Mr. Lapham in 2004. He delighted many readers that year by offering an account of the Republican National Convention in an issue of Harper's that arrived in subscribers' mailboxes before the convention began. Neville Elder/Corbis, via Getty Images

In a 2004 Harper's column, Mr. Lapham delighted many readers by offering an account of the Republican National Convention, with rueful observations on the proceedings, in an issue that arrived in subscribers' mailboxes *before* the convention began. Mr. Lapham apologized for the parody in case anyone was offended, but, as The Times noted, he "pointed out that political conventions are drearily scripted anyway — he basically knew what was going to be said."



Mr. Lapham's collection of thematically unified columns around his metaphor of America as a spoiled rich kid. It was published in 1980. Franklin Square

In 2007, a year after stepping down as editor of Harper's, Mr. Lapham was inducted into the American Society of Magazine Editors Hall of Fame. At the ceremony, Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter recalled seeing the patrician Mr. Lapham at the Manhattan literary hangout Elaine's, confused by the stunning woman who appeared to be a model showering him with attention — until she learned he was editor of Harper's, not Harper's Bazaar.



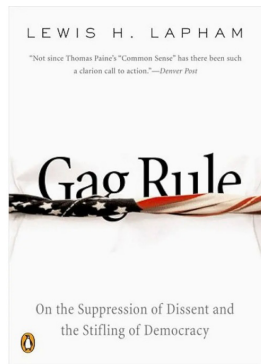
Mr. Lapham, at the 2006 National Magazine Awards in New York, accepts an honor for general excellence. (Evan Agostini/Getty Images)

"I came to imagine," he later observed, "that I was born to ride in triumph and that others, apparently less fortunate and more numerous, were born to stand smiling in the streets and wave their hats."

His grandfather, also a high-stakes gambler, ultimately frittered away much of the family fortune, and Mr. Lapham described himself as someone "brought up with the attitude of somebody affluent, but without the funds." He graduated in 1952 from the private Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Conn., and from Yale University in 1956 with an English degree. He then studied history at Cambridge but dropped out after six months. As he explained to the Kansas City Star, "I didn't have the patience for footnotes, and I didn't want to have to learn medieval German."

Many of his 15 or so books had their genesis in his essays in Harper's, including "Fortune's Child: A Portrait of the United States as Spendthrift Heir" (1980), a collection of thematically unified columns around his metaphor of America as a spoiled rich kid. Similarly, "Hotel America: Scenes in the Lobby of the Fin-de-Siècle" (1995) portrayed a society of lost values as it approached the turn of the millennium.

And "Gag Rule: On the Suppression of Dissent and the Stifling of Democracy" (2004) indicted the Bush administration for what Mr. Lapham called its efforts to deceive the nation about the Iraq war's origins and aims. Kirkus Reviews called the book "literate, sophisticated and plenty ticked-off: vintage Lapham and a ringing endorsement of First Amendment freedoms."



Mr. Lapham's 2004 book condemned the George W. Bush administration for what the author called its efforts to deceive the nation about the Iraq war's origins  
Penguin Books

In 2005, Mr. Lapham wrote and appeared in "The American Ruling Class," a documentary-style film featuring fictional characters as well as interviews with real celebrities, including Bill Bradley, Walter Cronkite, Pete Seeger, Robert Altman and Barbara Ehrenreich. It was shown on the Sundance Channel in 2007.

Instead, he took a job in 1957 as a cub reporter for his hometown San Francisco Examiner, where his tasks included procuring bourbon for the better-known writers. Sent to cover a flower show, Mr. Lapham watched in horror as an editor cut his 4,000-word treatise down to a single paragraph.

After three years at the Examiner, followed by two more at the New York Herald Tribune, Mr. Lapham turned to magazine writing because he found traditional newspaper coverage too confining for his worldly tastes. One assignment for the Saturday Evening Post took him to India to write about the Beatles as they studied Transcendental Meditation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Four decades later, he detailed the experience in his book "With the Beatles."

Survivors include his wife of more than 50 years, the former Joan Reeves, of Rome; three children, Andrew Lapham of Toronto, Delphina Boncompagni Ludovisi of Rome and Winston Lapham of Denver; and 10 grandchildren.

In addition to his regular presence on TV talk shows, Mr. Lapham introduced "America's Century," a six-part series for public television in 1989 that traced the sudden rise and eventual decline of American power in the 20th century. From 1988 to 1991, he hosted "Bookmark," a weekly public TV program about new literature.

The focus of many of his own books — he wrote 14, some of which were collections of his Harper's columns — was what he considered America's obsession with wealth and material possessions, which he called a "civil religion."

Several critics noted that such assertions were based more on personal observations than documentation. One reviewer of "Money and Class in America," Richard Eder in the Los Angeles Times, described him as "Tom Wolfe without the legwork."



After stepping down from the editor's perch in 2006, Mr. Lapham undertook his last diversion: Lapham's Quarterly, which examined modern problems through prisms of history. It ran writings by Aesop and Aeschylus, the medieval theologian Peter Abelard, John Adams and Louisa May Alcott, as well as Renata Adler, Woody Allen and Andre Agassi.

His lighter side often appeared in The Times. In a 1979 opinion essay that he called "The Servant Problem," he wrote:

*To the extent that the sovereign people have lost interest in governing themselves, they depend upon their servants to ward off their enemies, provide them with amusement and support the market value of their souls.*

*Rather than vote or read the Constitution (a document as tiresome as the trust agreements family lawyers occasionally ask them to sign), the heirs prefer to go to Mexico or Aspen to practice macrobiotic breathing and play sexual charades.*



Mr. Lapham in 2019. He was inducted into the American Society of Magazine Editors Hall of Fame in 2007. Jared Siskin/Patrick McMullan, via Getty Images

Lewis Henry Lapham II was born on Jan. 8, 1935, in San Francisco, the older of two sons of Lewis Abbot and Jane (Foster) Lapham. His father became president of the Grace Line and Bankers Trust. His grandfather Roger Lapham had been San Francisco's mayor in the 1940s, and his great-grandfather Lewis Henry Lapham had been a founder of Texaco.



Mr. Lapham, far right, at the 2006 National Magazine Awards in New York with fellow honorees Adam Moss, Jann Wenner, David Remnick and James Kelly. (Evan Agostini/Getty Images)

His books and essays "all amount to pretty much the same contemptuous, Olympian jeremiad: The powers-that-be are craven and monstrous, American culture is vulgar and depraved, the U.S. is like imperial Rome, our democracy is dying or dead. All of which is arguably true," [wrote](#) Kurt Andersen in New York magazine in 2005. "But, jeez, sometime tell me something I didn't know, show a shred of uncertainty and maybe some struggle to suss out fresh truth."

At age 72, in 2007, and with the financial support of wealthy friends like the chairman of Barnes & Noble, Mr. Lapham launched [Lapham's Quarterly](#), an erudite print counterpoint to what he considered the hyperactive pace and frivolous emphasis of internet culture.

Each issue examined one topic, such as love, war, politics or the family, through curated excerpts of the writings of great thinkers of the past. His goal was to infuse the wisdom of the likes of Aristotle, Thomas Paine, Simón Bolívar and [Vaclav Havel](#) into contemporary debates and to provide a springboard for discovery. (The magazine [announced](#) in late 2023 that, because of financial challenges, the print publication would be "on a temporary hiatus.")

"Somebody comes across it and ... goes from a smaller excerpt in the Quarterly to the whole work by Diderot," Mr. Lapham told Smithsonian in 2012, referring to the French philosopher and encyclopedist. "The hope of social or political change stems from language that induces a change of heart. That's the power of words, and that's a different power than the power of the internet."

Lewis and his brother, Anthony (who became a top C.I.A. lawyer), grew up in what he called “equestrian class” affluence. Lewis graduated from the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut in 1952 and from Yale in 1956. After a year of history studies at the University of Cambridge in England, he was a reporter for The San Francisco Examiner and The New York Herald Tribune and then wrote for The Saturday Evening Post and Life magazine.

In 1972, he married Joan Brooke Reeves. In addition to his wife, he is survived by their daughter, Delphina Boncompagni Ludovisi of Rome; two sons, Andrew and Winston Lapham; and 10 grandchildren.

Mr. Lapham wrote for Commentary, Vanity Fair, Fortune, Forbes and many other publications. He won the National Magazine Award in 1995 for his columns in Harper’s and the 2002 Thomas Paine Journalism Award, and he was inducted into the American Society of Magazine Editors Hall of Fame in 2007.

Some readers saw a contradiction in Mr. Lapham’s affluent life and his stalwart liberalism. But he said he made his choice soon after graduating from Yale, when he applied for a job with the C.I.A., then a bastion of Ivy League elitism.

The first question he was asked, he said, was “When standing on the 13th tee at the National Golf Links in Southampton, which club does one take from the bag?”

“They wanted to make sure you were the right sort,” he explained.

He found the question off-putting and dropped his spy ambitions for a career in journalism, although he said he knew the answer: a 7-iron.

Hannah Fidelman contributed reporting.

*Lewis when he wrote had an inimitable stature that convicted American decadence like no one else. He had a predilection for the Greeks and Romans I could not entirely share, or navigate through the Classical cultural waters like he could, but the parallels, real and in the American imagination, are unmistakable.*

*I have learned that the more I write, the more I can think, with the loop being reinforcing. I can write because I can think; I can think because I can write. Putting my thoughts out there bald and bare to be seen for what they are, and are not, is necessary to ever get anywhere as a thinker, scholar, and writer. Many a “profound” thought while in my skull has soon looked “pedestrian” in print.*

*I always loved Harpers (when Lewis was there) and whenever I have come across Lapham’s Quarterly, I have purchased it. Always I found things never before included in treatments of topics, like “Religion” for instance, adding something new and fresh. You can imagine Lewis’s editorial view on the matter!*

TJB