Foreword

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Izzy Stone spent over five decades in the news business, and he made a lot of mistakes. The first time I spoke to him, as an undergraduate doing an honors thesis, I called to ask if I could interview him about his writings about the Vietnam War. Izzy's response on the phone (I paraphrase from a thirty-six-year-old memory): "Well, I sure said a lot of foolish things about the Vietnam War, but sure, come over and we'll talk about it."

Izzy always strove for honesty, even at his own expense. But he was hardly the only honest journalist of his time, nor was he the only one with powerfully progressive sympathies. As readers of Robert Cottrell's fine biography will soon learn, Stone had one quality in abundance that separated him from the journalistic pack: unwavering intellectual independence. He married this to a degree of doggedness that sometimes bordered on obsession, and the two together allowed him to live a life—and create a body of work—that has few, if any, parallels in the history of American journalism.

The story of Stone's career is simultaneously one of the American left between the 1930s and 1980s and one of progressive journalism during those same decades, together with the internecine fight and external threats that consistently characterized these overlapping worlds. To follow the trails of both tales can be a head-spinning experience, as institutions and organizations split up, combined, broke off from one another, declared the previous day's

friends to be enemies, and then (briefly) made up until the next sectarian battle caused yet another cacophonous conflagration.

Amid this constant swirling of personal and ideological chaos that made up the American left of the “popular front” and post-popular front eras, Stone remained focused on the task he had set out for himself: to tell the truth about what he saw and stay true to the progressive, democratic commitments that guided him throughout his career.

Whether writing for the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, *PM*, the *Star*, the *Daily Compass*, the *New York Post*, or the *New York Review of Books*, and whether allied with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party, Corliss Lamont and the American Labor Party, or any number of offshoots and combinations of these, Stone stuck to his guns, often at great personal and professional cost. His heroic reporting on the desperate journey of the Jewish “displaced persons” smuggling themselves past the British led him to lose his job at the *Nation*. His insistence that a binational state for Jews and Arabs remained the best way forward for both sides cost him a massive promotional campaign for the book he wrote about his adventures, *Underground to Palestine*. But in neither instance did Stone apparently consider trimming his ideological sails for personal or material advantage. The truth is, he probably would not have known how to. All he knew how to do was focus relentlessly on the task he had set out for himself: to tell the truth about what he saw and what that inspired him to believe.

More than once, that meant Stone had to pack his bags and go when his employer and he failed to see eye to eye on any given issue. Leftists accused him of apostasy. Right-wingers accused him of espionage. Centrists by and large kept their distance. But for half a century—including the nineteen years that Stone was the sole writer, editor, and publisher of *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*—he blazed a trail of clear-headed, strongly argued point-of-view journalism that consistently discovered details and made connections that appeared nowhere else in the media. The four-page newsletter that Stone published, with the help of his devoted wife, Esther, began in 1953 with

five thousand readers and died with seventy thousand. Throughout its life, Stone held to the promise he made to readers with its first issue: that he would devote himself to covering issues relating to “peace and civil liberties,” and “if readers will be charitable at the start, and give me a little time to get the hang of this format, I will try to do a good job.” Sometimes that resulted in scoops that had eluded the rest of the press corps. (Stone’s lack of insider sources led him to focus his attention on government records that consistently turned up stories that would otherwise have been buried in the din of daily reporting.) When the *Weekly* turned into a tremendous success, with over seventy thousand subscribers when doctors finally forced him to shut it down in December 1971, Stone was no longer alone in bringing a progressive viewpoint to dogged investigative reporting. *Ramparts*, *Mother Jones*, *Rolling Stone*, and even Seymour Hersh in the *New York Times* had joined the party. But Stone was not done, and his late-in-life work in the *Nation* and the *New York Review of Books*, to say nothing of his having taught himself ancient Greek and writing *The Trial of Socrates*—his first best seller, published in 1988 when Stone was eighty-one and nearly blind—ought to be an inspiration to all of us, progressive or not, who seek to live a life worthy of the kind of book you now have in your hands.