

Obituaries

Richard Valeriani, NBC News correspondent bludgeoned for civil rights coverage, dies at 85

by [Harrison Smith](#) June 19 at 6:48 PM [✉ Email the author](#)

Richard Valeriani, an NBC News correspondent who was once clubbed by an ax-wielding assailant at a civil rights demonstration, earned the ire of the Johnson and Nixon White Houses for his television reporting and later worked on the other side of the camera, advising corporate executives and celebrities as a media consultant, died June 18 at his home in Manhattan. He was 85.

The cause was congestive heart failure, said his wife, Kathie Berlin.

As an NBC reporter from 1961 to 1988, Mr. Valeriani covered the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, rallies for voting rights in the South, the globe-trotting diplomat Henry Kissinger and the U.S. response to the Iran hostage crisis under President Jimmy Carter.

He also worked as a Washington-based correspondent for the “Today” show, the network’s flagship morning news program, although he expressed little pleasure in assignments that took him away from breaking news and scooping his competitors. “I was sure that Dick Valeriani of NBC was sneaking around behind my back — and of course, he was! — getting stories that would make me look bad the next day,” the revered CBS reporter Charles Kuralt [once said](#), explaining his turn in the 1960s from covering hard news to the offbeat subjects of his “On the Road” series.

Mr. Valeriani was NBC’s senior White House correspondent when he reported on an upcoming, then-secret 1967 summit between President Lyndon B. Johnson and Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, in a story that apparently led the president to unleash a fusillade of profanity.

“Johnson called him into his office at the White House and said, ‘There is no . . . way that you could know this if you are not [sleeping with] a Russian broad,’ Berlin recalled. “And Dick said, ‘Mr. President, I’m a married person.’ And he said, ‘That doesn’t mean [anything] with you Italians.’ ” In a memoir, the former Soviet spymaster Oleg Kalugin — then working undercover as an embassy press attache — wrote that [he was the one](#) who told Mr. Valeriani about the meeting.

Mr. Valeriani later covered the Nixon administration during the Watergate investigation, and as a State Department correspondent traveled more than half a million miles with Kissinger, the national security adviser-turned-secretary of state. The two men developed a warm relationship (according to Berlin, her husband turned down an offer to work as the diplomat’s spokesman), and in 1979 Mr. Valeriani published “Travels With Henry,” a breezy account of Kissinger’s approach to statecraft, fondness for junk food and rapport with members of the press corps.

“If it’s Thanksgiving,” Kissinger quipped during one long tour through the Middle East, according to Mr. Valeriani, “it must be Damascus.”

Although Mr. Valeriani spent most of his career in Washington, he said his most important work occurred in Mississippi and Alabama, where he helped bring images of peaceful civil rights demonstrators, tear-gas-filled streets and police attack-dogs to a national audience.

He became a part of the story himself on the evening of Feb. 18, 1965, while reporting on a voting rights march in Marion, Ala., a short drive from Selma. “When I got there with my camera crew, I knew we were in trouble,” he [told the Huffington Post](#) in 2015. “Locals sprayed our camera lenses with black paint, and the Alabama state troopers assigned to provide security did nothing to prevent them.”

As demonstrators began marching to the county jail, the streetlights cut out. Mr. Valeriani was taking notes in near-darkness when law enforcement officers started attacking the protesters, and he was clubbed across the side of the head with the handle of an ax. Another journalist, United Press International’s [Leon Daniel](#), later likened the sound to that of a [watermelon](#) being hit by a baseball bat.

“I remember a state trooper saying to the assailant, ‘You’ve done enough damage with this tonight,’ but he did not arrest him,” Mr. Valeriani recalled. “A white man came up to me and asked if I needed a doctor. I put my hand to the back of my head and looked at it; it was bloody. ‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘I think so.’ The man thrust his face up to mine and said, ‘We don’t have doctors for people like you.’ ”

A shaken Mr. Valeriani was hospitalized in Selma, where his NBC colleague [Charles Quinn](#) interviewed him for “The Huntley-Brinkley Report,” and received a get-well-soon telegram from Vice President Hubert Humphrey. The Associated Press later reported that his assailant, lumber salesman Sam Dozier, pleaded guilty to assault charges and was fined \$78.75. One black demonstrator at the rally, Jimmie Lee Jackson, was shot in the abdomen by a state trooper and died eight days later. His killing spurred the high-profile demonstrations and marches in Selma one month later, which Mr. Valeriani — fresh out of the hospital — covered for NBC.

Richard Gerard Valeriani was born in Camden, N.J., on Aug. 29, 1932, and raised in Burlington, N.J., by Italian American parents. His father was a quarry worker and his mother sold baby clothes.

He studied English at Yale University, where he worked alongside [William F. Buckley Jr.](#), the future conservative pundit, at the Yale Daily News and rose to become sports editor. After graduating in 1953, he attended the University of Pavia in Italy and the University of Barcelona before being drafted into the Army.

Mr. Valeriani began his journalism career at the Trentonian newspaper in New Jersey, and in 1959 he joined the Associated Press. His fluency in Spanish helped him land a posting in Havana, where his reporting on the Fidel Castro regime drew the attention of NBC and, eventually, led the communist government to force him from Cuba.

His marriage to [Lee Hall](#), a correspondent for NBC and later Voice of America, ended in divorce. In 1980 he married Berlin, a public-relations specialist in the movie industry. In addition to his wife, of Manhattan and Sherman, Conn., survivors include a stepdaughter, Kimberly Oser of Manhattan; and two grandchildren.

Mr. Valeriani was working in NBC’s New York City bureau when he resigned in 1988, saying he “felt underutilized” in “an age of shrinkage” within the news industry. The departure freed him to nurture his love of horse racing — he had previously found time to place bets while on assignment — and to begin a new career in consulting.

“I like to describe it as teaching people how to defend themselves against people like me,” he told the [New York Times in 1994](#), explaining his work with clients such as director Kathryn Bigelow, comedian Jimmy Fallon and former CBS and Viacom Chairman Sumner Redstone.

Even performers, he said, had something to learn about being on television.

“Almost everybody, I’d say 95 percent, come in for the first time and sit down in the chair and lean back, cross their legs and clasp their hands, none of which you should do,” he told the Times. “The essential elements,” he added, “are eye contact, being yourself, high energy and getting your message across.”

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Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago.

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