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### ABOUT PRESS

# How To Climb The Greasy Pole

By Joan Konner

**I**F SUCCESS is the guiding star in the murky firmament of this capitalist culture, never were the navigational lanes more visible than in two recent autobiographies of media moguls.

"Confessions of an S.O.B." by Al Neuharth, founder of USA Today and builder of the Gannett media empire, and "Succeeding Against the Odds" by John Johnson, founder and publisher of Ebony and Jet magazines, recount the classic rags-to-riches, poverty-to-power story and, in the process, define the values struggle that is the issue of our time.

The plot lines are remarkably parallel. Both

were poor. Both lost their fathers at an early age, and both were raised by strong and struggling mothers. Both established media empires, though the Johnson route was entrepreneurial and independent and Neuharth's a corporate climb on somebody else's capital. Both take pride and pleasure in their power, access and money (Johnson is on the Forbes list of the 400 richest Americans), and both are enjoying their ride through life in a first-class cabin hard-won by their own extraordinary accomplishments.

But their road was forked from the beginning. Johnson is black. Neuharth is white. That in itself is an obvious difference, making the Johnson journey a steeper climb. Less obvious and more significant are their differences in principles, character and values. Given the influence of the media over the public mind, each is helping to shape a different kind of country. Their differences draw the battle lines of a civil war for the future. Here are some quotes from both books, condensed

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and compressed:

*Why journalism?*

Johnson: For me, journalism was a skyscraper value precisely because it combined the ultimate business challenge with the ultimate social challenge.

Neuharth: The power of the press hooked me when I became editor of the Echo, our Alpena High School paper. As editor I was finally a big shot on campus. If having control of a newspaper could do that for me, I liked it. I indulged in, and enjoyed, the ancient and once honorable art of using the power of the press to favor my friends and get my enemies.

*Motives.*

Neuharth: Fame meant more to me than fortune, probably because we were nobodies when I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks in Eureka, S.D. I wanted to become important.

Johnson: We knew — how could we help knowing? — that all the high ground and money and weapons were in the hands of our adversaries. But

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it was worse than useless in that day to grind our teeth and curse racism. The question, the only question, was what were we going to do with what we had in order to make things better for ourselves.

#### *Vision.*

Johnson: Step by step I began to understand the revolutionary importance of the new journalism. Black newspapers were doing a good job of reporting discrimination and segregation, and we needed, in addition to traditional weapons, a medium to make blacks believe in themselves. In a world of negative black images we wanted to provide positive black images. In a world where blacks could do few things, we wanted to say they could do everything.

Neuharth: I've always liked bigness. Big opportunities. Big jobs. Big deals. Big companies. Big league. Long before the creation of USA Today, I knew what I wanted: the biggest newspaper in the country.

#### *Family.*

Johnson: My mother never went beyond the third grade. Yet she was the best-educated person I ever met. She was daring, she was caring, she believed you could do anything you wanted to do, if you tried. She gave me that faith and that hope, and that has guided my life. I couldn't fail her, for she had sacrificed too much for me.

Neuharth: He [my father] died two months before my second birthday. My mother considered marrying again. I despised every man who came to visit her.

When I was in the first grade, she called a family powwow to ask my brother and me how we felt about her marrying a widower farmer who had proposed. I threw a tantrum. I screamed, "If you marry him, I'll run away."

I was just being a brat to get my way. It worked. My mother rejected her suitor's proposal. I don't think she ever dated again. I've often wondered if I did the right thing for mother. I know it turned out to be the right thing for me. That tantrum was probably my debut as a self-centered S.O.B.

Johnson: I never really knew him [my father]. He was killed in a sawmill accident when I was eight. The next year my mother married James Williams, who delivered groceries for a bake shop. He was a good stepfather, and we never had a cross word.

#### *Bosses.*

Neuharth: There is no pleasant way to unseat a boss whose time is up. The 65th birthday incident convinced me that I could never again nudge Miller into changing his role or mine. I figured the next time it would take a sledgehammer. So I began forging the hammer.

Johnson: I drove President Pace [of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company] to the bank almost every day, and I used the opportunity to ask questions about business, life, success and black America. Not a week goes by that I don't recall and use some lesson that I learned from him and other Supreme executives.

#### *Wives.*

Johnson: What impressed me about Eunice in comparison with the other young women I had known is that our relationship was not just a romantic fling — it was a meeting of the minds on what was going on in the world. She was a good listener, sympathetic to my ambitions. She made me feel that maybe I would be somebody one day.

Neuharth, as told by Wife No. 1: Cheerleading brought us together when we were 16 in South Dakota. Al was the first boy cheerleader I had ever seen. Even then, he knew how to draw attention to himself. He was loud and constantly in motion. That hasn't changed much in nearly 50 years.

Neuharth, as told by Wife No. 2: He outgrew Loretta, his first wife. And he outgrew me. Neither Loretta nor I ever had a chance with Al. Nobody does.

#### *Values.*

Johnson: We've strayed in black America and in white America — from the values of family, community and hard work. And we've got to go back to that future. We've got to go back to the time when being an adult was a dangerous vocation that required a total commitment to the community and every child in it.

Neuharth: Life is a game. It is not an undefeated season. You win some. You lose some. To enjoy life to the utmost, you must play every game to win. Your won-lost record is the most important thing on the report card for how you have lived your life.

The question today for those who would participate in shaping the country's future is no longer: Are you a Democrat or a Republican, a liberal or a conservative, wed as the media are to those archaic categories of thought. The philosophical choice, in economics, politics, the culture, is one of values. Are you a Johnsonian or a Neuharthian? Are you adversarial or collaborative? Is life a game that at all costs you play to win, or a collective human enterprise? Neuharth's most meaningful gift, from his children, was a fancy black silk warm-up jacket embroidered on the back in white silk letters: "Only Cream and S.O.B.s Rise to the Top." Are you cream or an S.O.B.?

Footnote: There is a clue as to which side the media are on. Neuharth's book was widely reviewed. Johnson's was widely ignored in all except hometown — Chicago — papers and, ironically, in USA Today.